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Patrick Le Galès

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Neoliberalism and Urban Change: Stretching a Good Idea Too Far?

PATRICK LE GALÈS

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ABSTRACT Does neoliberalism matter for cities, urbanization processes, urban governance and policies? How and to what extent? What does this even mean? These questions are important as neoliberalism is a contentious and powerful political project and paradigm. This paper argues that: (1) it may be fruitful to **be clearer about the meaning** of neoliberalism rather than adopting an encompassing constructivist framework; and (2) that **neoliberalism may not explain that much** about the current transformation of urbanization processes and cities. Instead, these mechanisms need to be better specified and their limits defined: urban worlds and the urbanization processes of cities do not change all the time, in all ways. Rather than embracing the multiple, ever-changing forms of neoliberalism and the constructivist framework underpinning this position, this paper identifies a set of central points to define neoliberalism by contrast to liberalism, as one possible working definition of neoliberalism. Secondly, it discusses the neoliberalization of cities and urban policies, recognizing that cities change for many reasons, of which neoliberalism is just one.

EXTRACTO ¿Es importante el neoliberalismo para las ciudades, los procesos de urbanización, la gobernanza urbana y las políticas? ¿Cómo y en qué medida? ¿Y qué significa esto? Estas cuestiones son importantes porque el neoliberalismo es un proyecto y paradigma político controvertido y poderoso. En este artículo se argumenta que: 1) podría ser beneficioso ser más precisos sobre el significado de neoliberalismo en vez de adoptar un marco integral y constructivista; y 2) es posible que el neoliberalismo no pueda explicar con tanta claridad la actual transformación de los procesos de urbanización y las ciudades. Más bien se han de especificar mejor estos mecanismos y definir sus límites: los mundos urbanos y los procesos de urbanización de las ciudades no cambian continuamente y de todos los modos posibles. En vez de abarcar las múltiples formas en continuo cambio del neoliberalismo y el marco constructivista que sustenta esta postura, en este artículo se identifican una serie de aspectos centrales para definir el neoliberalismo, en comparación con el liberalismo, como una posible definición práctica de neoliberalismo. En segundo lugar, se debate la neoliberalización de las ciudades y las políticas urbanas, reconociendo que las ciudades cambian por muchos motivos, y el neoliberalismo es simplemente una de ellas.

RÉSUMÉ Le néolibéralisme, a-t-il une importance pour les grandes villes, les processus d'urbanisation, la gouvernance urbaine et la politique des villes? Comment et dans quelle mesure? Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire? Ces questions-là sont importantes parce que le néolibéralisme constitue un projet et un paradigme politiques à la fois controversés et puissants. Cet article affirme 1) qu'il pourrait s'avérer utile d'éclaircir le sens du néolibéralisme plutôt que d'adopter un cadre constructiviste global; et 2) qu'il se peut que le néolibéralisme ne dise pas grande chose à propos de la transformation actuelle des processus d'urbanisation et des grandes villes. En revanche, il faut que ces mécanismes-là soient mieux précisés et leur limites définies: le monde

Author details: Patrick Le Galès, CNRS, Centre d'études européennes de Sciences Po, Sciences Po Urban School, 127 rue Saint-Guillaume, 75337, Paris Cedex 07, France. Email: patrick.legales@sciencespo.fr

urbain et les processus d'urbanisation des grandes villes n'évoluent ni tout le temps, ni sous toutes leurs formes. Plutôt que d'embrasser les multiples formes de néolibéralisme en pleine évolution et le cadre constructiviste qui étayent cette position, cet article identifie un ensemble de points centraux pour définir le néolibéralisme, par rapport au libéralisme, comme une des définitions pratiques du néolibéralisme. Dans un deuxième temps, on discute de la néolibéralisation des grandes villes et de la politique des villes, tout en reconnaissant que les grandes villes évoluent pour de nombreuses raisons, dont le néolibéralisme.

摘要 新自由主义关乎城市、城市化过程、城市治理及政策吗？如何相关、且程度为何？这又意味着什么呢？上述问题相当重要，因新自由主义是个高度争议且强大的政治计画与范式。本文主张：（1）更明确地表示新自由主义的意涵，而非採取建构主义的架构，将更有所收获；（2）新自由主义或许无法对城市化过程与城市的当前变迁进行过多的解释。反之，这些机制必须更佳地具体说明，而它们的限制必须被定义：城市世界与城市化过程并非以所有的方式随时改变。与其拥抱多重且随时改变的新自由主义形式，以及支持此般立场的建构论架构，本文指认一系列的核心要点，以定义与自由主义对照的新自由主义，作为一个新自由主义的可能操作定义。再者，本文探讨城市与城市政策的新自由主义化，承认城市改变的理由众多，而新自由主义只是其中之一。

KEYWORDS neoliberalism urban policy urban governance politics public policy governmentality

INTRODUCTION

Does neoliberalism matter for cities, urbanization processes, urban governance and policies? How and to what extent? What does this even mean? These questions are important as neoliberalism is a contentious and powerful political project and paradigm, and because the term has come to be over-used without care and precision in urban studies around the world.

The question of neoliberalism 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 neoliberalism and the city, which provides a nuanced and intellectually stimulating set of sophisticated arguments about the making of the hegemonic neoliberal project and its confrontation with different terrains. This intellectual project has rightly stressed the importance of neoliberalism and greatly influenced our understanding of it. I share many points with their analysis, including the importance given to neoliberalism as a powerful ideology and political project; the historical importance of former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to the implementation of this project (also former US President Ronald Reagan); neoliberalism as an explanatory variable in urban transformations (PECK, 2013); the understanding of various geographies of neoliberalization; neoliberalization as a (never complete) process; and the fact that recent crisis and austerity policies are proofs of the robustness of neoliberalism. They also importantly make the point that cities are more than sites for top-down neoliberalization. Some of them have resources and capacities to constitute neoliberalization processes in relations with other cities and other levels of government. **Neoliberalism is indeed an important paradigm (HALL, 1993)** leading to serious processes of neoliberalization that are politically cruel and unfair. Its analytical importance as a concept in the social sciences **should not be abandoned, but it may** require qualification (AALBERS 2013).

With all due respect and political sympathy for their innovative and important work, this contribution suggests an alternative path (arguing that there is no one best way) to

that developed within the intellectual framework of BRENNER, PECK and THEODORE (2010, 2013). They examine neoliberalism in its different forms to analyse particular contexts of implementation, various processes (even contradictory ones) of roll-out and roll-in neoliberalization (BRENNER and THEODORE 2002). Their strategy has been macro-scale, highly constructivist at times, and all-encompassing. However, one could identify a contradiction between a rather deterministic macro framework relying upon a very fluid and constructivist definition of neoliberalism.

Within a large part of the urban studies world, neoliberalism 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, globalized capitalism and neoliberalism. This is a point rightly mentioned by Brenner, Peck and Theodore, who noted in their 2010 paper (p. 183) that they were quite perplexed by the conceptualization and use of the term 'neoliberalism' 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.

This paper is a contribution to the debate about this 'rascal concept'.

At times, 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 effort 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. Neoliberalism has been hailed as one of the main factors in the transformation of cities all around the world. It is therefore a key issue to examine. However, too often in urban studies, neoliberalism has been seen as explaining all sorts of transformation in different places, leading to assumptions of global convergence, and as explaining anything taking place in cities, from gentrification to the changing 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, neoliberalism, as a paradigm and a political project, has beyond doubt been very successful in changing representations of problems, providing programmes for conservative politicians and destroying Keynesian arrangements, with consequences for the organization of states and cities. Far too often however, the arguments about neoliberalism are general, unprecise, lacking discussion of any specific mechanisms, missing empirical data and marked by confusion between a number of processes such as globalization, financialization, privatization or blunt capitalist transformation. By contrast, in his classic Marxist vein, David Harvey's precise analysis (2005) clearly relates neoliberalism to changing power and class relations, and the capitalist accumulation process, including the destruction of existing institutions.

This paper aims at sharpening the analysis of neoliberalism, using an alternative 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 neoliberalism rather than adopting an all-encompassing constructivist framework and second, that neoliberalism may not explain that much about current transformation of urbanization processes and cities. Instead, these mechanisms need to be better specified and their limits defined: urban worlds and the urbanization processes of cities do not change all the time, in all ways.

Neoliberalism is indeed a political project, a nasty one, related to a paradigm. As a paradigm neoliberalism should be more clearly distinguished from liberalism, a point often neglected by urban scholars. Too often, the critical stand against liberalism, policies, state interventions and politics dominated by the bourgeoisie was seen as so obvious that it did not require much nuance to criticize neoliberalism (HARVEY, 2005). This paper's strategy to critically deal with neoliberalism is by contrast to try to characterize it and to take this paradigm seriously. After all, the term 'neoliberal' may largely be a misnomer, as neoliberalism 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 neoliberal argument too elastic, thus limiting its explanatory power. Neoliberalization is a process but it might be worth exploring some of the substantial characteristics of neoliberalism by contrasting it with liberalism. An element of clarification is suggested by contrasting neoliberalism 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 neoliberalism and the constructivist framework underpinning this position, this paper, in parallel with Michael Storper, identifies a set of central points through which to define neoliberalism in contrast to liberalism.¹ Secondly, the paper discusses the neoliberalization of cities and urban policies, and argues that cities change for many reasons, neoliberalism being only one of them.

STRETCHING A GOOD IDEA TOO FAR

Firstly, let us sound some notes of nuance about the impact of neoliberalism by starting with two quotes from major neoliberalism scholars. Mitchell Dean, the great Australian Foucauldian scholar, has voiced some worries about the conceptualization of neoliberalism:

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, pp. 135, 138):

... the core problems of neoliberalism as a concept: it is omnipresent and it is promiscuous. There may be a third: that neoliberalism is omnipotent ... There is little in the present for which neoliberalism cannot be held responsible. ... I encountered the following list of sites, institutions, processes, and practices that were identified as neoliberal (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 neoliberal? ...

This will sound all too familiar to urban scholars.

Secondly, however contested, there is a set of ideas that may be labelled as a 'neoliberalism', paradigm. In the literature, it may be conceptualized 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, neoliberalism is understood as a paradigm, a set of ideas which has been in existence since the 1920s in early form, and gained prominence from the 1970s onwards. This set of neoliberal ideas has deeply influenced a number of policies all over the globe. One way or another, neoliberal ideas have had long-term disastrous impacts on a number of economic policies in particular (BLYTH, 2013; GAMBLE, 1996; SCHMIDT and THATCHER, 2014).

Thirdly, there are many ways to deal with neoliberalism. 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 and 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 *Constructions of neoliberal reason* is to stress the genealogy and ongoing diverse and multiple forms hybridized in different contexts, the ‘polymorphic’ neoliberalism:

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 p. 13)

Peck concludes that ‘neoliberalism 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.² This is obviously a smart argument in the framework of a classic constructivist epistemology but with such a non-definition, bits of neoliberalism are everywhere and changing all the time. It is no surprise if any attempt to explain or characterize 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 *et al.*, 2013, p. 1091)

The emphasis on the fluidity of neoliberalism 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 conceptualization may be seen as a contradiction, or at the very least as a not very convincing research strategy.

There is also a difference between trying to characterize 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 neoliberalism and the conclusion derived for understanding current urban transformations through the lens of neoliberalism. The very constructivist understanding of neoliberalism limits the capacity to mobilize 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 an abstract theoretical concept and a more diverse set of historical situations,

the definition of the concept raises serious problems.³ That is where the argument presented here differs from them.

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

Instead of following a highly constructivist route and underlining inconsistent use of the term over time, **let us follow a 'moderately constructivist' road.** The following paragraphs aim at reflecting upon the making of this category and at suggesting one interpretation of neoliberalism. There is no need for transcendentalism. It should be emphasized that the interpretation put forward in the paper cannot justify a claim about what 'true' neoliberalism is. Understandings of neoliberalism 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.⁴ Here it is appropriate to 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 neoliberalism, this has led to an overstretching of the concept and a blurring of the capacity to identify specific mechanisms. A first order of clarification is required distinguishing liberalism and neoliberalism. 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 neoliberalism.

LIBERALISM AND THE QUIET STATE VERSUS NEOLIBERALISM, ILLIBERALISM AND THE MARKET SOCIETY

Neoliberalism 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 17th 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 and 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 (FREEDEN, 2008).⁵ In his paper, STORPER (2016, in this issue) gives a precise account of the relations between traditions of liberalism and neoliberalism.

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 emphasizes, strong emphasis on a different

conception of households (2013).⁶ 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 favour of creating a large sphere of individual autonomy and liberty to act, which is 'liberal' in the sense that there is a presumption in favour of the freedom of the individual unless there is a specific and justifiable reason in limiting this freedom. The state should be quiet and benevolent, concentrating on 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, that is, 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. However, 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 with forms of rationalization as stressed by Max Weber. LAVAL (2003, 2007) has in particular emphasized the importance of utilitarian ideas and the work of Jeremy Bentham, that is, the rise of humankind as a calculating beast, seeking to maximize 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 emphasize liberalism as a particular form of governmentality characterized 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, emphasizing the autonomy of the individual in part guaranteed by the state (including property rights of course) and the rule of law. Four points are central to the discussion in classical writings on liberalism:

- Firstly, most liberals accept the idea of market failure, which can be caused by monopoly, corruption, failure to deliver services or even, not often, too much inequality. This recognition allowed for the rise of progressive liberalism over the 20th century, including Keynesianism. The intervention of the state can be justified when dealing with market failures but that point should not be stretched too far: for most liberals, the question of inequality is not central but residual.⁷
- Secondly, liberalism is not always associated with democracy, but the emphasis on the rights and autonomy of individuals suggests 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 a 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 (SAYER 1995).
- Fourthly, liberalism often emphasizes the question of political order and fear of protest and revolutions.

Instead of giving a rather comprehensive and sometime floating conceptualization of neoliberalism, it may be useful to identify key features of neoliberalism contrasted with

those of liberalism identified above, beyond the issue of the intensification of market relations.⁸

Of course, neoliberalism has many strands – including the Austrian group, German ordo-liberalism, Hayek and the Mont Pelerin Society, the Virginia Public Choice school, the Chicago School of Economics of Milton Friedman, or the economic libertarians in the US (MIROWSKI and PLEHWE, 2009; GAMBLE, 2013; LARNER, 2009; TURNER, 2008). 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 neoliberal reason’, Jamie Peck clearly underlines the non-linear development of this paradigm; shaped by input from Hayek, Friedman and the Mont Pelerin Society and from different experiences, including the contradictions, the strange mix of ideas, the intellectual project, the process, the institutional matrix, the relations to capitalism and globalization, the Thatcher touch of neoliberalism, or what he eloquently calls ‘normalized neoliberalism ... which can fade into invisibility’ in the American debate.

However, acknowledging that neoliberalism is more than a simple set of monolithic ideas does not necessarily 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, p. 150)

One way to make sense of neoliberalism’s diversity is to focus on different periods as suggested by STEDMAN-JONES (2012). Neoliberalism 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 neoliberal governmentality (DEAN, 2010; MILLER and ROSE, 2007). Neoliberalism 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 the arbitrary power of state elites and managers (authoritarianism) or the possibility of majority or conservative-traditionalist tyrannies (collectivism) (MUDGE 2008). 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 neoliberalism. This is an interpretation, in no way a universalist definitive account. Neoliberalism 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 always seen as good.** It is by definition a superior form of social and economic organizations, and an end in itself. **This is a major difference from both political and economic liberalism: there is no such thing as market failures.** Solutions to problems or crises always require more markets.⁹ **Markets should govern every domain 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. Neoliberals 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 mobilized to create the market society, to discipline individuals – a language of discipline that is prominent in Hayek's thinking too.

The role of the state is central to extend property rights and to enforce market logics (BRENNER, 2004). This includes coercion and violence (GAMBLE, 1988). The mobilization 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, neoliberalism 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 (ONG, 2006, 2007). The state is crucial in the making of the market society in two ways (SCOTT and LE GALÈS, 2010): (1) to control and destroy social relations, (2) to create market actors through 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 ensure its maintenance and reproduction. Market societies are established by new institutions which legitimize, reward, and sanction different behaviours (SCOTT, 2012; BLOCK and SOMERS 2014). WACQUANT (2009) has also argued that one central element of neoliberalism is the rise of the penal state and the criminalization of the poor or of migrants, hence the sharp increase in imprisonment in the US (this is less relevant in Western Europe, although some similarities are witnessed elsewhere, e.g. in Sao Paolo or Mexico).

Hayek has written at length on the problem of politics. In neoliberalism, the question of the articulation between individual and general interest is simple: the maximization of individual interest more or less automatically results in the maximization of general interest.¹⁰ Many neoliberal strands are marked by systematic criticisms of politics and democracy, seen in terms of rentiers, corruption and 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 state. Pistor has analysed the development of transnational laws, norms, private arbitration or bilateral investment treaties to create extensive rights aimed at structuring an irreversible political order protecting large firms and property rights before anything else, profoundly undermining urban governance capacities or more general self-governance capacity (MILHAUPT and PISTOR, 2008).

General competition in all domains is seen as a universal norm (a central element of the neoliberal governmentality for Foucauldians). For them, neoliberal governmentality is defined as the discourses and dispositifs determining the government of populations in accordance with the principle of universal competition (DARDOT and LAVAL, 2009). Firms, individuals, households and governments should be organized along these lines. The conception of freedom has moved from autonomy to the disciplined, self-governed, calculating, *entrepreneurial homo economicus* who may be incentivized by rules. As stressed by DEAN (2010, p. 157; HAY, 2014), for Hayek (1976, 2014), freedom is not natural but an artefact resulting from the development of civilization and its disciplines. For more Foucauldian scholars, neoliberalism is therefore the prioritization of the self, individuals and personhood (SKEGGS, 2011; FOUCAULT, 2010). The individual is disconnected from the collective dimension. In order to be recognized, to gain value and to have worth, individuals have to transform themselves by performing

entrepreneurs of their self. In other words, neoliberalism is also about the development of new metrics and measurements about what is a worthy person, the production of the self as an entrepreneur (BLOCK and SOMERS, 2014).

Contemporary neoliberalism is little concerned with the concentration of private power and wealth, in contrast to classical Liberalism, early neoliberalism and all the social philosophies. As stressed by CROUCH (2011), in contrast to liberals, neoliberals ignore the threat to freedom, and the resources accumulated by large firms, their capacity to constrain the democratic process and to edict regulations in their favour, including to limit competition (in obvious contradiction to the gospel of generalized 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. It 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 neoliberalism ignores inequality in income distribution or wealth, arguing that it comes from efficient markets and has benefits for economic growth and social mobility.

Neoliberalism may also be seen as a social process, creating opportunities for some groups to alter existing social relations, hierarchical orders and challenge old elites (EVANS and SEWELL, 2013). Beyond the strengthening of capitalist social relations, the group led by Hall and Lamont has argued that sometimes, to some extent, those opportunities were used to combat, sometimes successfully, gender or ethnic inequalities (Hall and LAMONT, 2013; KYMLICKA, 2013). Neoliberalism is mostly constraining (HALL, 2011), may be violent, but may also be enabling in some particular contexts.

In the world of urban studies, as argued in the first section, overstretching the concept of neoliberalism has become a regular feature in order to characterize urbanization processes, the trajectories of cities all over the world or various urban policy changes. Distinguishing neoliberalism from liberalism and providing a working definition aims to provide intellectual tools to more precisely explain and characterize forms of neoliberal urbanization.¹¹

NEOLIBERALIZATION AS A FACTOR WITH LIMITED SCOPE TO EXPLAIN URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

This section first aims to present an ideal type of the neoliberal city and then contrast that with the importance of liberalism.

A Neoliberal City?

Once upon a time, in the late 1980s, Nicholas Ridley – a maverick neoliberal conservative minister in charge of local government within Mrs Thatcher's government in Britain – 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 neoliberal city, including the capacity to impose competition and destroy existing institutions by using

state authority, while implementing illiberal surveillance, low tax, minimum welfare and the marginalization of politics and democracy (JESSOP, 2002b).

Another example is provided by some of the neoliberal utopias of ‘new cities’, that is, avoiding tax, rules and undesirable populations (whoever they might be (ROSSI, 2013)). Projects for smart, eco, tax-free cities in Honduras, in Dubai, in India (DATTA, 2015), or South America are not so far away from the neoliberal urban utopia.

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 privatized and cases of market failures would only lead to more privatization. One would imagine large utility firms developing monopolies 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 (KÜNKELE and MAYER, 2012). The idea would be hegemonic. Individuals would be incentivized to maximize 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 (PECK, 2012). Urban governance would consist of sanctifying property rights, defining rules and norms, and creating patterns of insecurity and unpredictability to generate a social order based upon the constant adjustments to market norms. Inequalities would lead to an unstable social order, and the use of violence by state and urban authorities. Housing would be systematically financialized, a financial asset for households (ROVNIK, 2013). Land would be completely privatized, with public spaces at the mercy of private individuals. Collective conceptions of public goods would be eradicated.

However, as HACKWORTH (2007) rightly argues in his book, ‘neoliberalism, like many other isms, is a highly contingent process that manifests itself, and is experienced differently, across space. The geography of neoliberalism is much more complicated than the idea of neoliberalism’ (p. 11). Indeed. Many scholars have tried to study the discrepancy between the neoliberalization project and ideology and its implementation in different contexts. BRENNER, PECK and THEODORE (2010) have suggested the term ‘variegated neoliberalization’ 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.*, 2010: 35). They offer a strategy to analytically and empirically analyse the impact of neoliberalism even if the operationalization of the framework is far from obvious and is clearly influenced by their focus on the US or the UK. However, all in all, even they remain rather vague when explaining urban policy changes.

Neoliberalism as a Paradigm to Explain Urban Transformations

Are cities becoming neoliberal? Does neoliberalization or waves of neoliberalization explain urban change? I accept the analysis of the change of paradigm in economic policy, at least in some parts of the world (FOURCADE-GOURINCHAS and BABB, 2002). Things might be more nuanced for urbanization process and metropolises, however (HACKWORTH and MORIAH, 2006). There is no doubt about the neoliberal offensive, in particular in the US, UK and international organizations, and, to a much lesser extent, beyond these. Yet the focus on the neoliberalization process, however central

it might be, runs the risk of making it difficult to identify 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 conceptualizations and mechanisms have been put forward, in particular by HALL (1993), SABATIER and JENKINS SMITH (1993), JOBERT and MULLER (1987), FISHER (2003) and ZITTOUN (2014). One might conceive for instance that in many cities the neoliberal paradigm may transform the ideas, power relations, actors, substance or instruments of 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, neoliberalism may not determine policies or urbanization processes but may be used as a 'trendy label' by elites and opponents alike. Neoliberalism may also add a layer of political initiative within a deeply institutionalized context. It may influence the content or the implementation of urbanization 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 HARVEY (2005). Beyond issues strictly related to the economy, even the World Bank and the OECD have put aside the more neoliberal 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 (THEODORE and PECK, 2011). This is very far away from a progressive agenda, but that is not just neoliberalism. Indeed, in their 2010 paper, our three colleagues tended to present neoliberalism as the intensification of market logics or in other words the intensification of liberalism. The stress on hegemony and neoliberalization allowed the authors to explain that lots of processes are part of the neoliberalization process, that neoliberalism is hegemonic but always takes different forms and that there are very different types of implementation in different contexts. The argument is not convincing. This is no wonder when privatization, partnership, NGOs, competition and governmental rationalization may sometimes all be framed within the same package.

Historically, both urbanization 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 equipment, or ad hoc actions from various groups and organizations. 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 urbanization 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 colonization.

In the Western world, cities and urban regions are highly governed environments, where many public policies are implemented, and 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 neoliberalism in attempting to destroy those existing institutions and policies, as seen in particular in the UK from Mrs Thatcher to today's Cameron government. Socialist (sometimes), social democratic and environmental ideas have often supported the rise of public policies, rules, or social redistributive policies (LE GALÈS, 2002; KAZEPOV, 2005; STENNINGS *et al.*, 2010) 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 centralizing federal state, and neoliberalism does not play a major role. In Mexico, Sao Paolo, New York and Delhi, the state (part of a federation) governs and defines the rules and the tax power of cities. However, many policies are not implemented. In Istanbul, Moscow, Santiago, Shanghai and Jakarta, 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 neoliberal 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 and VITALE, 2013). The quest for the creation of social and political order in cities, and the process of planning and implementing policies, is always incomplete and fraught with contestation, implementation failure and lack of knowledge.

Let us take the case of Istanbul for instance. A series of papers have now argued that the transformation of Istanbul is all about neoliberalism and that the Tahir square movement is an example of resistance comparable to the Occupy movement. Neoliberalism explains Istanbul's development (KARAMAN, 2013; EDER and ÖZLEM, 2015). Is that really so, however? 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 organized by the state agency TOKI to get rid of informal settlements, the Gecekondu. Yet, 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 the massive construction of social housing. It also includes a new financial district, new transport investment and a giant mosque. One part of the story is about Istanbul's status in the competition between large globalizing metropolises – not really a new issue that is grounded in neoliberalism. In that case, the mobilization of neoliberalism 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 *et al.*, 2014), leaning towards authoritarianism. By contrast, the general explanation in terms of neoliberalism 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 (PARK et al., 2012) or, even more so, African metropolises (FOURCHARD, 2011, FOURCHARD and BEKKER, 2013).

Many processes of urban change rather reflect liberal orientations, the pressure of globalized capitalism and political projects. Sometimes the neoliberal 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 (TASAN-KOK and BAETEN, 2012). As mentioned in the first section of the paper, urban liberalism leads to privatization, low taxes, more consumer choices and some deregulation. Cities and metropolises may be far more resistant to neoliberalism than argued, particularly beyond the UK and the US. Classic liberal capitalism at a globalized scale is central as are political projects by different kinds of elites.

Urban policies are more often than not changing without neoliberalism. 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 or 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. Urban policies change for many reasons which may or may not be related to neoliberalism (LE GALÈS, 2015). The focus rightly put on neoliberalism 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, neoliberalism 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 neoliberal penal state in the US, less convincingly elsewhere (2009). By contrast, policies might be intentionally developed within the neoliberal 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 clienteles 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 neoliberal views according to which the city can be successfully governed uniquely through private action and market institutions.

CONCLUSION

Neoliberalism is an important concept (BARNETT, 2005). In accordance with 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. Avoiding too much universalization, macro processes and various forms of political economy are important features in understanding both urbanization processes and the trajectories of cities and metropolises. This requires some level of theoretical abstraction to define concepts. Neoliberalism is a macro level concept (used here as a paradigm) which has some influence on various urban worlds.

This paper argues that in order to identify the transformation related to neoliberalism and the process of neoliberalization, it is useful to be more precise in its conceptualization

and to avoid an all-encompassing constructivist definition that leads to confusion, over generalization and vague understandings of mechanisms or processes. Most cities, for better and for worse, have been influenced by liberalism, the state and globalizing 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 neoliberalism considerably weakens their claim that neoliberalism 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. This paper therefore provides a more precise definition of neoliberalism by contrasting it 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, globalized 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 explanations 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 so dramatically reshaped by neo liberalism**. Rather, a more globalized capitalist and liberal order in the making appears to be characterizing the direction of change in many cities. There are cases and traces of neoliberalism, but not so often beyond the US/UK cases. **Neoliberalism is an important question for critical urban research but there is a risk of stretching a good idea too far.**

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NOTES

1. That was also the strategy followed by Jason Hackworth for his book *The neoliberal city*, 2007, also see JESSOP (2002a).

2. 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, pp. 325–326)

3. 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 conceptualization of neoliberalization (i.e. the process) in terms of 'regulatory experimentation', 'inter jurisdictional policy transfert' and 'the formation of transnational rule-regime'. This conceptualization helps define how processes of neoliberalization have been extended (also see SIMMONS *et al.*, 2008 on that point) and says much about neoliberalism.
4. See STORPER (this issue), JONES (2012), DEAN (2014), HARVEY, (2005), PECK (2012), BOCKMAN (2011), CENTENO and COHEN (2012), DENORD, 2007, AUDIER 2012, and SIMMONS *et al.* (2008), FRIEDRICH (1955).
5. Among many, see BARRY (1996), LAVAL (2007), HINDESS (1988), DEAN (2010), SKINNER (1978), FAWCETT (2014), and FREEDEN (2008) GRAY (2002), and for a classic text, MILL (1869).
6. One could also develop ethical/philosophical elements such as conceptions of social justice
7. For a classic great critique see SAYER (1995)
8. See JESSOP 2002.
9. See Peck's clear developments on the crisis and the search for more market solutions (2010, 2013)
10. See the developments in LAVAL (2007) on the maximising of interest according to Bentham by contrast to Gary Becker.
11. A particular urban analysis of an old form of neoliberalism or an analysis of urban neoliberalism would be very interesting as sketched by AALBERS (forthcoming). There may be distinctive urban roots of neoliberalism. This is a promising avenue but that is not the focus here.

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