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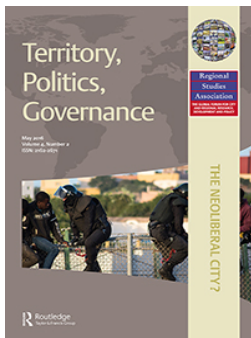
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EDITORIAL

The Neoliberal City – Theory, Evidence, Debates

GILLES PINSON and CHRISTELLE MOREL JOURNAL

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INTRODUCTION

For almost two decades now, neoliberalism and neoliberalization have become the object of increasing interest not only in political debate but also in the social sciences, and in particular urban studies. Because the definition of neoliberalism (or neoliberalization) is itself one dimension of this debate, we provisionally define it here as the set of intellectual streams, policy orientations and regulatory arrangements that strive to extend market mechanisms, relations, discipline and ethos to an ever-expanding spectrum of spheres of social activities, and all this through relying on strong State intervention. These streams and orientations are far from constituting a coherent and stable *ensemble*. That is the reason why many scholars prefer the notion of neoliberalization in order to depict the inherently fuzzy, diverse, contingent, ever-mutating and path-dependent *processes* of regulatory change that have been inspired by neoliberal ideas (BRENNER and THEODORE, 2002).

This special issue is not a collection of articles exposing what the neoliberal city is or providing case studies of neoliberalized urbanism.¹ We assume that the reader is familiar with what has become a structuring, if not dominating, current in urban studies. If he/she is not, he can refer in particular to the numerous productions of Brenner, Peck and Theodore in the bibliography. The purpose of the editors of this issue is rather to modestly provide a contradiction to this body of literature, because although it has structured much of the current production in urban studies, it has not so far given rise to a structured debate.

Genesis of a thesis

Different schools of thought in the social sciences have sought to characterize neoliberalism and neoliberalization and evaluate its reach and effects (see JESSOP, 2013 and

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BROWN, 2015 for similar efforts to typologize scholarship on neoliberalism). Five of them can be identified. First, historians of ideas (AUDIER, 2008, 2012; DENORD, 2007; MIROWSKI and PLEHWE, 2009; STEDMAN JONES, 2012) have striven to decipher the archeology of neoliberal thought. They often emphasize mutations and internal competition between ‘thought collectives’ and present neoliberalism as a fluid movement of ideas not a ‘coherent ideology nor political rationality’ (DEAN, 2014, 153). Second, anthropologists and sociologists inspired by Bourdieu’s early insights (1998) have interpreted neoliberalization as a new ‘articulation of state, market and citizenship that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third’ (WACQUANT, 2012, 71). Here, neoliberalism is conceived as a political project rather than as an economic one. State bureaucracies are central actors in this project. More precisely, neoliberal reforms are the outcome of struggles and new power relationships within the bureaucratic field, and the resulting ‘tilting of state priorities and actions from the Left hand to the Right hand, that is, from the protective (feminine and collectivizing) pole to the disciplinary (masculine and individualizing) pole of the bureaucratic field’ (WACQUANT, 2012, 73; see also DEZALAY and GARTH, 1998, emphasis is in the original). Third, scholars inspired by the seminal writings of FOUCAULT (2004) have defined neoliberalism as a new regime of governmentality and neoliberalization within which the rise of technologies and devices constructing competition and economic calculation have become new moral standards (REIGNER, 2016; see also LARNER, 2000, 2003; CLARKE, 2008; ONG, 2007; DARDOT and LAVAL, 2009; HIBOU, 2013; EPSTEIN, 2013; BROWN, 2003, 2015). Here, the scientific project consists of deciphering and documenting a new rationality, a new set of arts of governing rather than in establishing the causal mechanisms that gave birth to this rationality. The fourth approach to neoliberalization is a structuralist, neo-Marxian and class-based one. It defines neoliberalism as a ‘political project to re-establish the conditions for capitalist accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites’ (HARVEY, 2005, 19; HARVEY, 2006).

The fifth school of thought is the one with which most of the authors contributing to this issue would like to engage. First, because it is the one that provides the most systematic analysis of the relations between neoliberalization processes and urban settings. Second, because it has become a structuring pole in current debates in urban studies. This stream is mostly embodied by radical or critical geographers – Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, Adam Tickell, Erik Swyngedouw to name just a few – who built on the works of David Harvey on ‘the entrepreneurial turn’ in urban governance and policies and on the insights of French economists from the *Regulation School*. Most of these authors first adopted a political economy approach applied to space and cities. Following HARVEY’S (1989) seminal article, their original intent was to analyze the impact of the transformation of productive systems and the international division of labour and production on cities and urban policies. Their initial assumption was that the evolutions in the political, administrative or socio-cultural realms were not the only cause of the transformations that reconfigured the shape, social structures, economic functions and governance devices of Western cities since the 1970s. These transformations were also linked to more profound and structural evolutions in the economic sphere, that were themselves subsumed under terms such as post-Fordism, globalization or flexible specialization (MOULAERT *et al.*, 1988; PECK and TICKELL, 1994; BRENNER, 1999). However, in the early years of this scholarly stream, although scholars were able to identify a political project or ideological offensive, structured around political figures such as Thatcher or Reagan, forcing through and accompanying economic transition via the promotion and enforcement of new regulatory devices, they did not name it neoliberalism yet.

Instead, it is only progressively that the identification of an ideological and political offensive supporting economic change and promoting institutional adaptations to the new economic order has emerged in this literature. The reason for this novelty is twofold. The first is purely analytical: seeking to overcome the functionalist and structuralist bias of the first accounts of the rise of post-Fordism and its impact on cities entailed retheorizing agency within this process (BÉAL and ROUSSEAU, 2008). The second reason is of a normative and even militant nature. Radical geographers consider that, in the critical context we are living in, the role of social science, and in particular of geography and urban studies, is to overcome the ‘empiricist and positivist tradition’ (BRENNER and SCHMID, 2014, 331). Urban scholars should shift from the past focus on ‘concrete investigations’ (BRENNER and SCHMID, 2014, 331) and the ‘priorization of empirical data’ (MERRYFIELD, 2014, 388) and to move on towards a role in building up concepts able to unveil hegemonic projects behind spatial changes. Such a move would help to equip movements of resistance with adequate conceptual tools. In other words, inspiration has been the ‘practical emergency’ of fighting against neoliberalism by naming it and deciphering its various effects on cities. This endeavour justifies the effort to put neoliberalism at the centre of scientific attention and, beyond, at the heart of any explanatory system. Crucially, it requires the building of concepts rather than the accumulation of empirical data.

There is no room here to give an exhaustive presentation of this theoretical ensemble. Broadly speaking, four key ideas structure it. The first consists in affirming that the material and regulatory changes that occurred since the 1970s and deeply impacted urban landscapes, policies and governance are not merely the result of economic processes, but of a wider process involving changes in regulatory arrangements. Neoliberalization is also, and primarily, a process of a political nature implying the destruction of previous institutions and the creation of new ones. The second idea is that neoliberalization did not imply the hollowing out of the State but rather its reengineering as an agent imposing the diffusion of market ethos and discipline in an increasing number of social spheres. The third idea is that the ‘neoliberalization of urbanism’ (or urbanization) is a central feature of the general process of neoliberalization. New constraints imposed by upper tiers (central governments and international organizations) but also local initiatives have provoked the ‘tendential reorganization of local institutional arrangements in ways that promote, intensify and extend market rule as opposed to earlier, managerial and distributionist orientations’ (Brenner in BROGAN, 2013, 187). However, the process of neoliberalization of urbanism has been progressively completed and accelerated by a process of ‘urbanization of neoliberalism’. With the financialization of the economy, urban assets, built environments have become increasingly central and even crucial in the current forms of capitalist accumulation. Neoliberalism does not only land in cities or impact urban governance; cities are basically crucial cradles of neoliberalization, provide fundamental material bases for this process, but also for its contestation.

Merits of a thesis

We will outline the main limitations of the theory of urban neoliberalization in the next sections of this short introduction. Before doing so, it is worthwhile pointing out some of its many merits. Broadly speaking, the high level of conceptual sophistication, the outcome of more than ten years of elaboration, is an impressive feature of the neoliberalization thesis. While in other disciplines, like political science (see for instance JOBERT and THÉRET, 1994 or SCHMIDT and THATCHER, 2013), neoliberalism or neoliberalization are weak descriptive notions used to designate, without much effort to undertake

definitions or conceptualizations, nor a political project or set of reforms, critical geographers have gone further in definitional work and inscribed neoliberalization in a broader, and again very sophisticated and to some extent convincing, theoretical framework. More specifically, the critical geography approach in terms of neoliberalization has four major advantages.

The first significant achievement of this approach is to subsume under one synthetic notion a set of transformations that most other social science scholarship tends to treat separately (BÉAL, 2010). For instance, the neoliberalization framework has been of great help in giving sense to the transformation of states' territorial policies from a redistributive to a competitive orientation (BRENNER, 2004); in deciphering the new nature of the relationships between state and urban government and the rise of competitive forms of resource allocation (EPSTEIN, 2013); in understanding the origin of the financialization of the economy and its impact on urban spaces (HACKWORTH, 2007; AALBERS, 2012); in figuring out how the focus on economic efficiency within urban policies has undermined the democratic project itself and replaced debate, dissensus and participation by the concentration of power in narrow conclaves involving politicians, business leaders and experts (see RACO *et al.*, 2015, but also COCHRANE *et al.*, 1996; SWYNGEDOUW, 2009; PINSON, 2010).

The second merit is a reintegration of economic structure into the analysis of urban change and urban governance, and this even if many scholars from this stream are eager to depart from a purely functionalist approach to neoliberalization. Whereas over previous decades, much scholarship in urban studies had tended to drop elements of socio-economic structures from their analytical frameworks, to isolate social processes from economic dynamics, or to focus on the cultural origins of the 'new urban moment', critical geographers relocated these changes in the context of broader economic changes. If their current tendency to attribute these changes to a single cause is highly disputable, early publications on the post-Fordist and entrepreneurial transition from which the neoliberalization thesis emerged had the merit of attracting scientific attention on the link between capitalism and urban change.

The third merit of the neoliberalization approach is the identification of the role of the State in neoliberalizing processes. The state is not a mere victim of neoliberalization as the first accounts of neoliberal reforms, observing deregulation and privatization, once considered (see for instance, CROUCH, 1997). Neoliberalization instead implies the reengineering and even the reinforcement of the state in illiberal or even authoritarian ways, and this at both national and subnational levels (PECK, 2001). Historians of ideas documented how the godfathers of neoliberalism gathered in the Lippmann conference and the Mont Pélerin Society. They were initially concerned by the necessity to protect free markets with strong institutions (AUDIER, 2008). Indeed, research on the global South and structural adjustment policies have shown how the Bretton Woods institutions have tried to impose a strong state able to create spaces of generalized competition (HARRISON, 2010). Other scholars, including STORPER (2016) and LE GALÈS (2016), have demonstrated how the preservation and even sacralization of a sphere of individual autonomy, that were core aspects of classical political and economic liberalism, have given way in contemporary neoliberal ideas and practices to illiberal practices aimed at disciplining marginalized populations and favouring the interests of large corporations (CROUCH, 2011).

The fourth merit is the approach's capacity to identify the processual nature of neoliberalization. To a certain extent, expressions such as 'neoliberalism', 'neoliberal city' or 'neoliberal urbanism' are misleading since most of the scholars are studying a process – and more precisely *processes* – rather than a state. Peck and Theodore, for instance,

'have remained sceptical of talk of a coherent and stable neoliberal order, opting instead for the language of neoliberalization, as a signifier for an always-contradictory process, and for an evolving/rolling programme of restructuring' (2012, 179). Another feature of this processual approach is the insistence on different phases of the neoliberalization. The most famous avatar of this concern for periodization is the distinction made by Peck and Tickell between a 'roll-back' phase, characterized by deregulation and the dismantlement of preexisting Keynesian institutional frames, and the 'roll-out' phase that saw the creation of new rules and institutions in line with neoliberal precepts (PECK and TICKELL, 2002; see also PECK *et al.*, 2009 – where the 'roll back' and 'roll out' terms are replaced by 'destruction' and 'creation'). A corollary of this processual approach to neoliberalization is the emphasis on the contingent and path-dependent impact of neoliberalization in different national and urban settings. 'An understanding of actually existing neoliberalism', wrote Brenner and Theodore, 'must [...] explore the path-dependent, contextually specific interactions between inherited regulatory landscapes and emergent neoliberal, market-oriented restructuring projects at a broad range of geographical scales' (2002, 351).

However, the neoliberalization thesis has also clear limits, most of which are addressed in three of the articles gathered in this issue (see LE GALÈS, 2016; PINSON AND MOREL JOURNAL, 2016; STORPER, 2016). For the purpose of this short introduction, we will distinguish four types of limitations: definitional, descriptive, analytical and normative.

Definitional limits

The first range of limits of the neoliberalization thesis is of a definitional nature (MUDGE, 2008; CLARKE, 2008). In the social sciences, working with unstable concepts or notions is not a problem *per se*. Fuzzy notions can be used to build up approximate insights into unknown social phenomena or trends. However, when the loosely defined object becomes a key component of an explanatory system, and even an independent variable, then problems arise (VENUGOPAL, 2015). How can you pretend to establish the causal impact of something you are unable and even unwilling to define clearly? The strange thing is that the most prominent proponents of the neoliberalization thesis in urban studies both deplore the ill-defined nature of this 'rascal concept' (BRENNER *et al.*, 2010, 184) and remain sceptical about the possibility and even the necessity to provide a precise definition. Peck, for instance, considers that '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' (2013, 144). Therefore, 'crisply unambiguous, essentialist definitions of neoliberalism have proved to be incredibly elusive. [...] It would be [wrong] to reduce neoliberalism to some singular essence [because] it is contradictory and polymorphic' (PECK, 2010, 13).

We might object with CASTREE (2006) that if social scientists want to evaluate the putative effects of neoliberalization, which he and we consider as an essential task, relying on such a loose definition is unsatisfactory. Targeting more specifically Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism, Wacquant deplores the absence of clear definition of neoliberalism in this kind of research and the consequential risk of confusing changes induced by neoliberalization with those caused by other 'forces of rationalization and individuation characteristic of Western modernity *in globo*' (2012, 70). For him, neoliberalism 'has an *institutional core* that makes it distinct and recognizable' (2012, 71). In the same vein, Dean highlights the problematic gap between the definitional caution of the neoliberal urbanism theorists on the one hand, and their imprudence when it comes to attributing causal impact to neoliberalization, on the other (2014). Refusing

to define precisely a phenomenon to which you assign mighty power has the inestimable advantage that you will never be wrong, and indeed that you will be authorized to consider any contradictory sign as an unexpected dimension of the ‘messy hybrid’ (PECK, 2010, 7) you are dealing with. This shortcoming, or ‘*tour de passe passe*’, is clearly identified by LE GALÈS (2016). For him and Storper, there is another way to address the issue of neoliberalism. For STORPER (2016) neoliberalism does have fixed coordinates that are not that difficult to identify, and by understanding them, we can clear up much of the over-reach of the neoliberalism literature with respect to the history of neo-liberal ideas.

Descriptive limits

The second series of limits of the neoliberalization thesis is about its pertinence as a descriptor. The question here is to know whether the notions of neoliberalism or neoliberalization adequately reflect the transformation of urban space, policies and governance during, say, the last 30 years. The question is also to know whether the various processes subsumed by critical urban scholars under these notions are effectively locatable, despite their variegated shapes, in sufficiently numerous local and/or national contexts to infer the hegemonic nature of neoliberalization processes. The first problem here is that an important share of scholarship on the neoliberalization of urbanism is of a purely theoretical nature. Moreover, as indicated previously, the most prominent figures of radical geography tend to depreciate empirical inquiry as a naïve and inadequate scientific practice and to consider conceptual work as a more intellectually and politically useful duty.

Second, and more importantly, many signs indicate that, in many cities and countries, there has been no such thing as a complete and systematic reorientation of national or urban policies along more competitive and market-friendly paradigms. For instance, in many cases, European cities have been the cradle of an expansion and diversification of welfare protections, and there have been absolutely no signs of any kind of ‘roll-back’ phase. Processes of ‘territorialization’ or ‘urbanization’ of welfare provision that have occurred in many countries might certainly have provided the opportunity for a shift towards the ‘activation’ of social spending or a rebirth of assistance-oriented social policies. However, firstly the development of urban social policies has not always followed this path, adding instead new insurance-based social protections to existing ones at the national level. Secondly, this ‘territorialization’ has not always been accompanied by the retrenchment of national welfare devices (indeed this is actually rather rare). Thirdly and finally, new urban social policies have often been willing to overcome a paternalist and bureaucratic approach to welfare, with a focus on the development of individuals’ capabilities and the promotion of rights for new kinds of social groups such as ethnic and sexual minorities (SARACENO, 2002; KAZEPOV, 2005). These changes might imply a transformation of the nature of the relations between individuals and society, the administration, the State and social collectives, but they often have nothing to do with neoliberalism. On another front, some urban governments, in several French cities in particular, have been very proactive in the struggle against gentrification through new housing policies that have involved, for instance, the setting of minimum amounts of social housing in the total housing stock at the neighbourhood level or patient negotiations with developers over integrating low income housing within their projects. That might not be enough to counter deepening social inequalities and gentrification in the city but it does mean that not all policy initiatives are reducible to the neoliberal project. Studying the metamorphosis of social policies in Europe, FERRERA (2013) considers that the term neoliberalization does not adequately give the overall sense to the many changes that occurred in this

sector since the early 1980s. Neoliberal ideas have certainly had a great influence on social policies from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, but they also combined with other ideological streams, in particular with social-democratic visions of welfare and Rawlsian conceptions of equality. The result of this combination varies from one European country to another and is certainly not reducible to a mere reformulation of neoliberalism. Ferrera considers that the notion of ‘liberal neo-welfarism’ is a better term for capturing the current compromise around social policies in Europe. Adopting a more general view, BRAITHWAITE (2008) considers that the continued expansion of public expenditures in most western countries is an obvious denial of the neoliberalization thesis. He proposes instead the notion of regulatory capitalism to capture a reality where states and bureaucracies attempt to control an increasing range of sectors of social and economic activities, and not necessarily to promote competition. For LE GALÈS (2016), most of the policies that have promoted market mechanisms are more the result of the application of a liberal agenda than a neoliberal one.

Another descriptive limit of the neoliberalization thesis is the distinction between clear-cut historical phases corresponding to different policy paradigms and different types of state/market relations. These kinds of periodization are always useful to make sense of irremediably fuzzy processes of socio-political change. However, the lack of nuance that often accompanies these periodisations weakens the whole theoretical framework. In many cases, the distinction between a Keynesian ‘before’ – characterized by the emphasis on redistributive objectives in policies and of policy instruments typical of the bureaucratic state (centralization, authoritative forms of coordination, planning, etc.) – on one hand, and a neoliberal ‘after’ – characterized by supply-side oriented policies, the retrenchment of welfare and the recourse to forms of coordination and incitation inspired by the market – on the other hand, is highly problematic. When looking for instance at the French case, PINSON AND MOREL Journel’s paper (2016) or Levy’s publications (1999, 2008) show that the French state did not wait for the end of the Keynesian era to promote policies clearly favouring business interests and market mechanisms, and sometimes in a fairly aggressive way. For Levy, ‘the *dirigiste* model was erected on a foundation of labor exclusion and conservative hegemony, with the state steering resources from consumption to investment’ (2008, 418). And that occurred in the middle of the Keynesian era! Pinson and Morel Journel remind the reader that the *Etablissements publics d’aménagement*, a French version of the subsequent British Urban Development Corporations, were invented in the late 1950s to implement either projects that were typical of ‘spatial Keynesianism’, such as new towns and, or projects that would nowadays be labelled neoliberal locational policies (BRENNER, 2004), such as the development La Défense business district in Paris. In the case of Southern European countries, the imperfect and spatially unequal development of Fordism and of the Keynesian State makes it difficult to identify a clear-cut shift from a Keynesian era to a neoliberal one. Therefore recent innovations in urban policies in Italian or Spanish cities instead embody the gradual and difficult construction of a brand new sector of urban policies rather than the implementation of a neoliberal agenda (PINSON, 2002, 2009). In these very same countries, the channelling of capital investment to real estate rather than industrial sectors, a trait identified by Hackworth as a central feature of urban neoliberalism (HACKWORTH, 2007), is a well-known process whose roots can be traced well before the 1970s transition. The works of Garcia on Spanish real estate markets (GARCIA, 2011, 2016) remind us that what Henri Lefebvre called the ‘secondary circuit of capital investment’ was already a primary one in European countries with relatively weak industrial bases (LEFEBVRE, 1970).

The limits on the descriptive power of the neoliberalization thesis – elaborated and defended by mostly Anglo-American scholars – are often raised by scholars familiar

with the continental and even more the southern European context. The tradition of comparative studies of national systems of local government (GOLDSMITH and PAGE, 1987; HESSE and SHARPE, 1991; BOBBIO, 2002; PAGE and GOLDSMITH, 2010) and of the varieties of urban utilities provision systems (LORRAIN, 2005) can be of great help to explain this gap. To begin, these sets of research showed that the building of highly bureaucratized urban administrations during what specialists of administration call the ‘progressive era’ (DUNLEAVY and HOOD, 1994) went much further in the Northern part of Europe (UK, Netherlands and Scandinavia) and in the US than in Southern Europe (France, Spain and Italy). In all these cases, bureaucratization entailed the adoption of ‘in-house’ approaches to service provision, that is, internalization of many functions within public bureaucracies, the construction of long command chains going from elected officials to street-level bureaucrats and the recourse to hierarchy as the main coordination mechanisms. This mode of bureaucratization frequently engendered forms of ‘government failures’ that might have paved the way for brutal forms of reaction under the guise of neoliberalism. Therefore, in the Northern countries, reforms imposing privatization, externalization and market discipline to urban administrations took more extreme forms and had dramatic effects. By contrast, in the Southern European countries, the delegation of public service provision to private firms, the building up of joint-ventures companies articulating public and private capital to implement development projects, is not a feature that appeared in the 1980s, but rather is the rule since the late 19th century. Furthermore, these researches have shown that the role of local government and the nature of the relations between central state and local government are quite different in the North and in the South. SMITH (1985) distinguishes countries where ‘efficiency’ is the main concern as far as local government is concerned, and those where the ‘community’ dimension dominates. In the first category, which corresponds largely to the Northern part of the continent where the process of national integration went quite smoothly, the representation of local communities absorbed by a centre was not a big issue and local government ‘naturally’ became endowed with mostly technical and managerial functions. By contrast, in the South, the process of national integration and state-building was a highly conflictual one. As a result, southern local authorities have been deprived of many functions by state administrations but local-elected officials have had a prominent role in defending local interests against what is seen as the voracious central state (GRÉMION, 1976; TARROW, 1977). Hence, the recent emergence of strong developmentalist and competitive urban agendas in Southern European cities cannot only be interpreted as the result of the imposition of the neoliberal paradigm from above. Here, urban entrepreneurialism is also, and above all, a manifestation of a change in state–cities relations, and of the activism of urban leaders struggling to gain more autonomy in a context where the central state has loosened its grip upon them (Le GALÈS, 2002; Le GALÈS and PINSON, 2005).

To sum up and put it bluntly, there are many traces of academic Anglo ethnocentrism in the neoliberalization thesis. This is visible in a propensity to infer the generality of processes – the reduction of local autonomy, fiscal stress, the downgrading of social expenditures, etc. – that are likely to be very specific to the US and UK.

Analytical limits

The neoliberalization thesis also has analytical limits. The definitional instability that we already mentioned and that renders difficult any kind of serious empirical testing is one of them. In this section, we limit ourselves to mentioning four others. The first limit is a double-edged tendency consisting of aggregating and subsuming under a sole and single

process of change – namely neoliberalization – several dynamics that barely have anything to do with each other or with neoliberalism, on the one hand, and in making this unique process responsible for any kind of change, on the other. From this perspective, neoliberalism lies behind phenomena as different as new forms of planning, large urban development projects, the organization of mega-events, the concern for sustainable development, public–private partnerships, new initiatives in urban economic development, approaches to empowerment, area-based social policies or the circulation of policy models. To use Clarke’s words, neoliberalization ends up being an omnipresent and omnipotent process (CLARKE, 2008). Omnipresent because, as highlighted by STORPER (2016), the radical literature on neoliberalization tends to aggregate ideas and actions that can have quite different origins and motivations within a single (omnipresent) macro-process. Omnipotent, because neoliberalization proponents totalize or systematize the causes of these ideas and actions by reducing them to the same (omnipotent) macro-process. For Venugopal, this practice of totalization has led to a problematic ‘over-identification of different sets of otherwise unconnected phenomena under a single, and thus increasingly unstable and ambiguous label’ (2015, 170). This kind of approach tends to over-simplify the genealogy of phenomena of social change and processes of policy reform. It diverts researchers from the identification of other sources of change, and, more problematically for the theories of neoliberalization research itself, it prevents them from seeing how neoliberal ideas and processes mix with other streams of ideas and processes to produce hybrids that are most likely the real source of social, political and urban change. As underlined by PINSON AND MOREL JOURNAL (2016), the omnipotence and omnipresence of neoliberalization within analytical frameworks prevents scholars from identifying trends of change that can compete with, contradict but also support processes of neoliberalization. To be fair, the proponents of the neoliberalization thesis admit the existence of such other trends: ‘we conceptualize neoliberalization as one among several tendencies of regulatory change that have been unleashed across the global capitalist system since the 1970s’ (PECK *et al.*, 2012, 269). The problem is that they never pay much attention to the exact nature and weight of these other ‘tendencies of regulatory change’.

The second analytical limit is the shallow attention given to ‘contexts’. As mentioned above, neoliberalization proponents have made considerable efforts to provide room for the variety of ways in which the neoliberal paradigm has been ‘acclimatized’ in different urban and national contexts. Indeed, Brenner and Theodore, with their notion of ‘actually existing neoliberalisms’, have proved eager to ‘emphasize the contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects insofar as they have been produced within national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices and political struggles’ (2002, 349). Similarly, in a more recent piece, BRENNER *et al.* stressed that their conception of neoliberalization stood in sharp contrast to other accounts that depicted the neoliberal process as a worldwide force of ‘homogenization or convergence of regulatory systems’ (2010, 184). However, this distinction seems rather rhetorical since differences seem to lie in the rhythm of application of neoliberal reforms and in the depth of neoliberalization’s impact on institutional landscapes, rather than in the degree of resistance to it, or the role of counterweight played by other paradigms. For these authors, variety lies in the degree of neoliberalization, but the latter is still considered the sole paradigm and trend of macro-change that is able to modify regulatory systems. In other words, neoliberalization might be hampered by existing sets of rules, habits and practices, but there is no other paradigm likely to be a serious competitor. Thus, at the end of the day, it is meant to prevail. Whatever they claim, critical geographers theorizing

neoliberalization depict it as a force for convergence imposed upon all local and national contexts. Although a ‘constitutively uneven’ and ‘spatially heterogeneous and temporally discontinuous’ force of change, neoliberalization generates everywhere the ‘extension of market rule’ (BRENNER *et al.*, 2010, 188). If neoliberalization theorists were serious about contexts, they would consider situations where neoliberalization forces are present but are either challenged or even marginalized by other forces of change, or neutralized, absorbed and even ontologically altered by existing institutional and regulatory frameworks. The problem is that in this literature, neoliberalism always acts as a parasite upon something else, an alien body that denatures, and hybridizes other and/or existing paradigms or regulatory arrangements but is never itself ontologically ‘parasited’, denatured and hybridized by other influences. The end of the story is always one where neoliberalization is the only force able to produce its deep effects in the long term. However, what prevents a different ending? If ‘market-disciplinary regulatory projects often combine, parasitically, with ostensibly alien institutions and policy regimes to create “hybrid” institutional landscapes in which commodifying and market-constraining logics commingle and co-evolve’ (BRENNER *et al.*, 2010, 189), why should we consider (1) that the offspring of this wedding is more neoliberal than welfarist or Keynesian and (2) that the dominating trend of change is neoliberalization? The exclusive focus on this trend of change at the exclusion of any other is a lively proof that, *in fine*, contexts are not so important for the proponents of the thesis and that neoliberalization is the sole changing force travelling in depth the institutional contexts and pushing toward the same state of markets rules and ethos domination. The policy mobilities and fast policy transfers literature, one of the most recent avatars of the neoliberalization literature (MCCANN and WARD, 2011; PECK and THEODORE, 2015), is clearly affected by this shallow attention to contexts. The study of the transfer of policy models is presented as a way to refine the neoliberalization thesis by leaving room for agency, for varieties and even for counter-hegemonic projects or alternative strategies. However, here again, even if neoliberal policy models are always the objects of struggles, trade-offs, adaptations and hybridizations at the local level, these processes always end up just accompanying the alteration of policy design coherent with neoliberalization.

A third analytical limit is the excessive power given to ideas and intellectual paradigms in the analysis of social, political, economic and spatial change. The status of ideas in critical geographers’ account of neoliberalization is not completely explicit. Nevertheless, they started from a structuralist political economy approach before moving progressively towards an approach that is more constructivist and more sensitive to the role of agency, ideological crusades and the role of ‘thought collectives’. Peck’s piece on the spread of neoliberal ideas is a clear example of this constructivist and interpretive transplant onto an initially structuralist approach (PECK, 2010). In this brilliant book, Peck shows that ideas matter and that organizations and political entrepreneurship are essential to promote and turn them into government programmes. However, the role of ideas in neoliberalization theories is problematic. First, these theories tend to overestimate the role of ideas in the policy-making spheres that often prove to be quite hermetic to new ideas and to be governed instead by routines, professional values and established interests. Positioning the power of ideas at the centre of explanatory devices also means considering that there is relative coherence in the policy-making process, and that ideas produce their effects through top-down and efficient processes of implementation and coordination. Yet, as Le Galès reminds us, ‘by contrast to large generalization, urban policy implementation often reveals contradiction, power relations, and weak top-down capacity of coercion’ (2015, 903). In this context, it is very likely that great ideas will be confronted with contradictory tendencies that alter their content. PICKVANCE (2008) makes two further

interesting points about ideas in the neoliberalization thesis. Firstly, explaining policies or a change in policies by the strength of one particular ideology implies that you are able to identify other ideologies and to prove that those other ideologies are absent, vanishing or simply less influential. Ideas rarely produce their influence in an ideological vacuum. However, the other ideological streams are strangely absent in most of works on neoliberalization. Secondly, for Pickvance, it is highly doubtful that ideas come first in processes of policy change, nor act as the primary causes of change. 'Ideologies', he wrote, 'often play this rationalizing role in urban politics, i.e. [...] ideologies serve as resources to actors in making after-the event justifications designed to maximize the political benefits of a policy' (2008, 4). As a result, 'ideologies are never sole causes and must be placed in wider explanations. They may even be no more than rationalizations and not causal forces at all' (2008, 6).

This propensity to overestimate the role of ideas as a corollary of structural change constitutes the fourth analytical limit of the thesis of neoliberalization: a tendency to evacuate the complexity of the social and the necessary composite nature of social change. We are aware that 'complexity' is too easy an argument but let us object that it is often mobilized by holders of the neoliberalization thesis themselves! First, as outlined above, the many changes that radical geographers attribute to neoliberalization might have other causes, some of them not necessarily planned. As Storper clearly puts it, 'much urban policy change is indeed less motivated by macro-ideology than by a complex pragmatics of dealing with an urban environment shaped by changing technologies, migration patterns, lifestyles, economic specialization, and economic development' (2016, 254). Political, social, economic and spatial change does not necessarily occur by virtue of ideas, long-term plans or political enterprises. It also happens through pragmatic and improvised adaptations to new issues, problems, opportunities, technologies, resources, mobilizing available cognitive schemes and policy instruments. For Barnett, neoliberalization theories tend to 'residualize the social', to see it as the object of top-down reforms inspired by big ideas. It thus ends up neglecting 'the pro-active role of socio-cultural processes in provoking changes in modes of governance, policy, and regulation' (2005, 10). Some skilled actors might be able to take advantage of critical situations when old recipes seem to fail, by pushing forward new ideas and paradigms but this is not always the case. At the end of the day, these piecemeal changes might form a system that research might be able to capture with new notions, like neoliberalism, but it does not mean that this notion inspired the actors of change, nor that this change was planned or is the outcome of a single process or set of ideas. Then, the proponents of the neoliberalization thesis tend to minimize the complexity, autonomy and inertia of spheres and mechanisms of public policy-making, in particular as far as cities and urban policies are concerned. Public policy studies have analyzed the role of ideas at length and made them a potential cause of change (HALL, 1993; MULLER, 2000). Nevertheless, they have also demonstrated that policy-making is also a world of overlapping, incoherence, competing objectives, inter-organizational rivalries, struggles among bureaucratic fields and between different segments and professions, etc. They have also demonstrated that the universe of policies is characterized by institutional inertia and path dependence. In this context, a scenario of change inspired by a single stream of ideas is not the most plausible. In cities, existing institutions are embodied not only in regulations and policy programmes but also in a stock of material devices such as infrastructures, facilities, services, that cannot be easily dismantled and therefore constitute obstacles to policy change. Furthermore, changes in the sphere of public policies might be induced by the hubris of rationalization that has its own dynamic that does not have much to do with neoliberal ideas or market values. Finally, the

neoliberalization thesis tends to reduce political conflictuality within cities to the struggle ‘between the forces of hegemony and the spirits of subversion’ (BARNETT, 2005, 10). In reality, the structure of conflict in cities, and at other scales, is much more plural and complicated than that. Consequently, urban (policies) change is not necessarily the result of the conflicts involving neoliberal supporters with other groups. In many cities, the central conflict is rather between clientelistic and reformist parties, between the supporters of ambitious urban policy programmes and the defenders of the *status quo* and non-intervention, between established groups and outsiders, etc. Moreover, most of the time, neoliberal ideological elements are not explicitly mobilized within these struggles.

Normative limits

To complete this exploration of the limits of the neoliberalization thesis, let us move on to the normative terrain. Seeing social sciences as a militant’s tool is not a heresy, as long as normative orientations do not compromise intellectual honesty. The neoliberalization thesis’ proponents have explicitly claimed this normative stance in their writings. And they were right to do so! However, let us try to identify the shortcomings of their thesis from this very point of view.

Firstly, with very rare exceptions, for instance research on ‘the right to the city’ (PURCELL, 2008) and very recent special issues coordinated by a new generation of promising scholars (BÉAL and ROUSSEAU, 2014; FEATHERSTONE *et al.*, 2015), practical alternatives to the current conventional wisdom that is supposed to dominate urban policy-making are rarely addressed in the neoliberalization literature. To be fair, the leading authors on neoliberalization sometimes mention ‘ideological others’, specify that ‘neoliberalization is never found alone’ and that ‘there are always other active sources and sources of regulatory change [and] countervailing interests, pressures and visions’ (PECK *et al.*, 2013, 1093). However, they often stop there. It is hard to figure out who these ideological others are, a gap which raises both analytical and normative issues. However, let us concentrate on the latter here. This lack of precision about alternative sources of regulatory change often leads the reader to think that neoliberalization theorists are nostalgic for the good old days of Fordist capitalism. Peck’s work on the cultural policies of Detroit and London before and after the neoliberal transition is a good illustration of this implicit nostalgia (PECK, 2011). As critical geographers are probably aware, Fordism was far from being an ideal regulatory system if we consider issues such as international division of labour and consumption, gender relations or the environment, to mention only a few. In this issue, Storper suggests that ‘the critical neo-liberalism literature displays an a priori preference for statist or collectivist society’ (2016, 245). Thus, by neglecting the description of ideological and practical alternatives, defenders of the neoliberalization thesis not only weaken its overall explanatory system (cf. Pickvance’s remark mentioned above), but they have also indirectly contributed to inhibiting the emergence of alternatives. By reifying neoliberalization as the sole hegemonic project able to change the world, the scholars defending the neoliberalization thesis have unwittingly deprived alternative forces for change of any form of social visibility. More precisely still, it has not tooled up progressive forces with a grip on reality and an assertive view of their ability to change it. If the social sciences are not only a matter of analyzing the world but also of making it change for the better, it is the duty of social scientists to detect seeds of progressive change. Here the neoliberalization thesis has at best acted as a hand-brake. At worst it has ended up being a set of blinkers.

The second normative limitations of the neoliberalization thesis, closely related to the first, is that by reducing all the transformations in market economy, public policies and

urban forms to a neoliberal invasion, and by neglecting the conflicting and contradictory forces – good and evil – that combine to produce these transformations, this thesis provides an unequivocally dark vision of the chances of social, economic, urban and political change. By doing so, they deprive themselves and progressive movements of a more complete vision of ongoing change. More importantly, they ignore the positive potential [*sic*] of what is not only a nasty transformation of capitalism, domination and governmentality, but also a wider transformation of ways of working, coordinating, building identities and social linkages, etc. Neoliberalization might be only one of the many political projects and intellectual crusades that certain actors have mobilized to take advantage of the ongoing changes, changes that have no necessary ‘great organizers’ and do not proceed from any ‘big design’. That is the duty of progressive scholars: not only to deplore a series of changes that nobody controls entirely, but also to identify both the dangers and the positive dimensions of changes in work, consumption, trade and coordination habits in order to give opportunities to the promoters of alternative political projects to exploit this positive potential. Fredric Jameson wrote that ‘someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (2003, 76). However, maybe the world and capitalism, or to put it differently the various forms taken by market economy, are one sole and only thing. There might be no outer world and we thus might better struggle with the dangers and potentials the only one we have offers. ‘And what if there were no exteriority, no otherness to Capital, call it Nature, Socialism, the Party or whatever; what if, instead, within the system itself, foci of contact and war were incessantly multiplying’ (LYOTARD, 1976, 16; our translation).

It is not the purpose of this special issue nor of this introduction to downplay the importance of critical geography’s theoretical insights about neoliberalization. The authors of this introduction, along with most of the contributors to this issue, consider them as decisive inputs for the understanding of current changes transforming urban settings. However, it is our conviction that neoliberalism or neoliberalization does not need to be presented as an omnipotent independent variable to be of some scientific interest. We also believe that conventional definitions of neoliberalization should be stabilized in order to evaluate its specific effects and help identify other forces of change. There is no doubt that our present, cities and polities are to some extent neoliberal and neoliberalized. To some extent only though. The controversy about neoliberalization has just begun. That is good news.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTE

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