

If neoliberalism is everything, maybe it is nothing

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A comment

The starting point of this comment is Juliana M. Zanotto's (2020) recent paper in *Planning Theory*: 'The role of discourses in enacting neoliberal urbanism. Understanding the relationship between ideology and discourse in planning'. It is one of many in a line of papers in the field of planning theory, and related fields such as political geography and political economy (e.g. Peck, 2004), that take neoliberalism as their focus of study or attack. This comment is not so much, or not only, directed at Zanotto's paper (which contains a very relevant and interesting conceptual discussion of discourse and ideology), as it is at the general treatment of the concept of neoliberalism in planning theory and practice.

According to Zanotto, neoliberalism is a dominating force. In recent decades, it has been 'shaping planning practice and the production of space' (p. 105). In a review article in *Progress in Planning*, Tore Sager (2011) identifies as many as fourteen different planning-related policies with a neoliberal rationale: city marketing, urban development by attracting the 'creative class', economic development incentives, competitive bidding, public-private partnerships (PPPs), private involvement in financing and operating transport infrastructure, private sector involvement in procuring water, business-friendly zones and flexible zoning, property-led urban regeneration, privatisation of public space and sales-boosting exclusion, liberalisation of housing markets, gentrification, privately owned and secured neighbourhoods, and quangos organising market-oriented urban development. Zanotto goes further by saying that neoliberalism is not only a set of policies but an *ideology*, a belief system, that shapes ways of thinking and acting.

No-one I know calls him- or herself (a) neoliberal, nor claims to be following a philosophy or ideology of neoliberalism. However, people and things (e.g. policies) may be, and are, qualified as being or doing such *by others*. And those who receive this

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qualification should not take that as a compliment. Moreover, neoliberalism is even used as a ‘political swearword’ (Hartwich, 2009). Zanotto, too, uses the concept to ‘uncover [. . .] *regressive* practices such as gating, segregating, and the urbanisation of environmentally sensitive areas – practices that are far from embodying the normative progressive goals of planning’ (p. 105 – italics by the commenter). Apparently, planning has intrinsic, incontestable, and exclusively benevolent goals, and everything that does not meet those is ‘neoliberal’ or – even worse – is not ‘planning’. One would expect that such stark qualifications are accompanied by clear definitions of what deserves to be condemned. Instead, it is argued that neoliberalism does not constitute ‘a homogeneous and consistent set of ideas [. . .] these beliefs are flexible and adaptable’ (p. 123).

And this is exactly my concern with the use of the concept in the literature and in common speech: one, its broad and unclear definition in combination with, two, the negative normative connotation it is generally given. The second is not problematic in itself, as negative value judgements are perfectly legitimate, but is problematic *because* of the first. I will discuss both sequentially.

Conceptual stretching

First, there is a general analytical problem with ‘conceptual stretching’, which is the construction of vague, amorphous conceptualisations. This can be found abound in the social sciences as people want to construct universal cross-boundary and context-unspecific concepts (Sartori, 1970: 1034). However, this results in fuzzy concepts, concepts that ‘posit an entity, phenomenon or process which possesses two or more alternative meanings and thus cannot be reliably identified or applied by different readers or scholars’ (Markusen, 2003: 702). This, too, is the case with neoliberalism, which according to Clarke ‘suffers from promiscuity (hanging out with various theoretical perspectives), omnipresence (treated as a universal or global phenomenon), and omnipotence (identified as the cause of a wide variety of social, political and economic changes)’ (Clarke, 2008: 135). I believe the omnipresence of the concept is self-evident from some of the quotes I shared before, and otherwise a quick Google Scholar query on ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘urban planning’ should provide sufficient reassurance. The omnipotence and the promiscuity of neoliberalism require some more substantiation and illustration.

Many urban events and processes, such as the current housing affordability crisis in many cities, the build-up and the burst of the housing bubble in the US in 2008/2009, gentrification, segregation, polarisation, urban sprawl, urban shrinkage, and the rise of gated communities, are often considered to be the result of neoliberalism. In other words, the result of the government not taking enough control and leaving too much to the voluntary interaction between private actors (e.g. Sager, 2011: 148). The role of government policies and rules itself often remains underexplored. Urban sprawl is a case in point: it is frequently portrayed as the consequence of an uncontrolled market process. However, in an article that I wrote with a Belgian colleague we claim that urban sprawl in Flanders and the Netherlands is not only the result of market processes, that is, of homeowner preferences and real estate developers trying to accommodate those, but also of government policies and rules (i.e. *not* the absence of them).¹ We give many examples of such rules and policies, among which is the fascinating Flemish ‘fill-in rule’ (*opvulregel*), a

rule from the 1970s that was later abandoned. This rule allowed, regardless of the actual allocation of land uses in a land-use plan, the development of land between two houses for residential purposes as long as these two houses were no more than 75 m apart and on the same side of the street. In practice, local authorities also considered houses on the other side of the street and measured the distance with an elastic band (i.e. in practice, distances of over 75 m were also considered). Consequently, much low-density urban development has taken place *because* of this rule (Buitelaar and Leinfelder, 2020: 53).

As for neoliberalism being promiscuous, it helps to compare it with its classical predecessor. Neoliberalism as a term was introduced in the early 1900s to refer to attempts to revive classical liberalism of the likes of Adam Smith, John Locke and David Hume. However, in its current shape it encompasses ideas and policies that are from other traditions, such as pragmatism and utilitarianism (most notably, welfare economics). Many of these are not only different from but also contradictory to classical liberalism. Think of policies that stimulate public-private partnerships for urban renewal, fiscal policies for subsidising homeownership, urban-development projects aimed at attracting the ‘creative class’, megaprojects in order to attract international businesses, and legislative changes to cut third-party participation and appeal under the euphemistic label of ‘streamlining’ decision-making processes. All of these are considered neoliberal but are also all in contradiction to classical liberalism. Classical liberals argue for respect for the rule of law, limitation of public discretionary powers, limited public spending, and against the state favouring specific (private) interests through subsidies or otherwise. In short, neoliberalism is promiscuous and internally inconsistent since it includes notions of classical liberalism and notions that are simply at odds with this classical version of liberalism.

Unspecific condemnation

Vague concepts such as neoliberalism do not only limit the understanding of contemporary social and urban processes – if that was ‘all’, one could reduce it to an academic problem – but also hampers designing good institutions and pursuing effective policies. Having become a euphemism for ‘bad’ (policies or practices), its stretched and amorphous nature works detrimental. Every policy change associated with neoliberalism, or running the risk thereof, is repudiated *a priori* and misses the opportunity of serious scrutiny.

Deregulation, for instance, is usually considered an element of neoliberalism that is omnipresent and causing nothing but negative effects. However, deregulation of some parts of the social system may help to weed obsolete, redundant, ineffective, or counterproductive laws. Moreover, many legal philosophers have pointed out that what is actually taking place is the opposite of deregulation: ‘regulatory accretion’ (Ruhl and Salzman, 2003). This is a response to the risks in modern society, based on the conviction of governments that all social complexities must be met (immediately) by equally complex legal systems (Epstein, 1995; Nonet and Selznick, 1988). The negative effects of complex legal systems are well-known. Examples include little certainty and guidance due to rapid obsolescence of the rules, high administrative costs, limited compliance and enforcement, and room for opportunistic and even fraudulent behaviour (Moroni et al., 2018).

This comment does not say that the critiques of certain planning policies or practices is invalid. The point is that these critiques remain obfuscated by the hollow label of ‘neo-liberalism’. It does not tell us anything about what it is exactly that is problematic, why that is so, what would work instead, and why and under which conditions. Those who condemn something as neoliberal have all their explaining still ahead of them. Greater conceptual precision would improve academic discourse as well as the contribution of planning theory to planning practice.

Note

1. See Moroni and Minola (2019) for a similar claim.

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