

# NEOLIBERAL URBANISM AND ITS CONTESTATIONS

**Crossing Theoretical Boundaries**

**Edited by**

**JENNY KÜNKEL and MARGIT MAYER**



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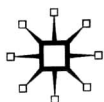
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## Neoliberal Urbanism and its Contestations

*Also by Margit Mayer*

CITIES FOR PEOPLE, NOT FOR PROFIT: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City (*co-edited with Neil Brenner and Peter Marcuse*)

URBAN MOVEMENTS IN A GLOBALISING WORLD (*co-edited with Pierre Hamel and Henri Lustiger-Thaler*)

THE GERMAN GREENS: Paradox between Movement and Party (*co-edited with John Ely*)

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## **Part I**

# **Theoretical Debates: Competing Approaches in the Study of Urban Neoliberalism**



# 1

## Introduction: Neoliberal Urbanism and its Contestations – Crossing Theoretical Boundaries

*Margit Mayer and Jenny Küinkel*

Neoliberalism has proven far more resilient than was anticipated by the early scholarship on the neoliberalization of the economic, political, and social spheres of contemporary societies. Providing an operating framework for competitive globalization, neoliberalism has apparently succeeded in flexibly adapting its market-centered forms of restructuring to a wide and varied range of local and national contexts: in North and South, East and West, in the context of liberal democratic as well as authoritarian societies, the mantras of free trade, flexible labor, and active individualism have come to shape politics on every level, and – post-recession talk of resuscitated Keynesian policies and more market regulation notwithstanding – neoliberal hegemony, in spite of its obvious vulnerabilities, appears only to have consolidated in the wake of the 2007–8 financial and economic crisis.

Crucial to the successful adaptation to, and reproduction of, neoliberalism within a great variety of unevenly developed spaces have been the globally reconfigured urban settings where neoliberal ideas and policy practices have been experimented with, modified, contested, and implemented in locally specific and uneven ways (Leitner et al., 2007). The processes of neoliberalization have thus been neither uniform nor unchallenged; instead, they occurred and continue to occur via the (re)production – through varied local institutions and political actions, each shaped by its own historical structures and balance of power – of hybrid forms of ‘actually existing neoliberalisms’ (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Oppositional and challenging social movements have everywhere impacted on this multifaceted process of generating locally specific forms of neoliberal urbanism, very often oscillating ambiguously between resistance and integration.

The neoliberalization processes at work in diverse settings have prompted, because of their wide diffusion and global incidence, a variety of theorizing efforts – mostly from political-economic and Foucauldian perspectives. As these perspectives are frequently seen as being at odds with each other,<sup>1</sup> their respective advances have rarely been systematically juxtaposed (cf. Uitermark, 2005). We believe that their contradictions and tensions can productively be used to overcome the shortcomings of each perspective and to mobilize their strengths and their potential jointly to explain the complex phenomena of (urban) neoliberalization and its contestation. Together, these approaches can contribute to our understanding of the ways in which neoliberal policies in urban and social developments interact with older forms of regulation (including those of earlier rounds of neoliberalization) and the ways in which they are contested by alternative projects and reshaped in the search for more stable regulatory landscapes. In particular, the ways in which power operates can be grasped better from a perspective that pays equal attention to structural conditions and concrete practices and subjectivities.

Therefore, this volume strives, first, not only to enhance the dialogue between the dominant neo-Marxist/regulationist and the Foucauldian governmentality frameworks but also to integrate the focus on the (counter) power of discourses or processes of identity formation and normalization as suggested in post-structuralist feminism, postcolonial studies, and post-operaist subject theory. Second, it focuses on the meshing of neoliberalizing policies with older and alternative forms of regulation, thus moving beyond the dominant US/Eurocentric focus to include some of the experience and perspectives of the global South. Third, it pays particular attention to the ‘modernizing’ function of local contestations for the neoliberal project, as these contestations are continually being used to ‘reboot’ neoliberalism. In scrutinizing the ways in which movements and contestations are instrumentalized in the adaptation processes of neoliberal urbanism, we seek to identify moments when such integration is difficult or even impossible.

### **Theoretical pluralism – over/underestimating the potential for social change**

Political-economic accounts of urban neoliberalism have stressed the move away from the redistributive policies characteristic of the postwar era (as, for example, the provision of local social services and public housing) towards more competitive forms of governance and an extension



of market rule into formerly nonmonetarized aspects of social life, as well as more repressive approaches towards the urban poor (cf. Brenner and Theodore, 2003). In the course of globalization Western states have been fostering competition among cities while handing more and more tasks pertaining to economic development, as well as social infrastructures, down to the municipalities. In the global South structural adjustment programs have been exerting even stronger pressures for fiscal constraints on the (local) state. Part of this development has already been debated since the early 1990s under the heading of urban 'entrepreneurialism' (Harvey, 1989) or 'postfordist city' (cf. Mayer, 1991). Under the label of the 'neoliberalizing city' (Peck and Tickell, 2002), political-economic theorization refined this diagnosis by emphasizing the process character of neoliberalization rather than viewing it as a predetermined outcome or a relatively stable phase (as scholars within the Fordism/post-Fordism frame had done previously; cf. Plehwe et al., 2006, 1–2).

Foucauldian perspectives, on the other hand, contributed to the analysis by highlighting another novel aspect of 'neo'-liberal rule: whereas classical liberalism and neoclassical economic theory (on which, according to some classifications, early neoliberal ideology is based) promote market rule as stable and self-sustaining, neoliberal governmentalities are based on the assumption that entrepreneurial subjectivities have to be created and have, indeed, increasingly been promoted by state actors and employers alike (cf. Barry et al., 1996). With this focus on the intersections of state and subject, Foucauldian governmentality studies have provided a framework which complements the more structure-oriented political-economic analysis.

On the basis of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, which not only includes the consent of the governed but is also always 'protected by the armor of coercion' (Gramsci, 2007, p. 75), the two perspectives may thus be seen as complementary for the analysis of how the neoliberal project is continually reworked and contested in various spheres of life. Materialist accounts stress the growing prominence of elements of coercion (such as the shift from welfare to 'workfare' (cf. Peck, 2001; Eick et al., 2004) or to 'prisonfare' (Wacquant, 2009)) and show how the implementation of market rule often impacts on subjects as an *external* force of institutional restructuring – through budget cuts, global budgets, or performance evaluation, or simply through the oppressiveness of poverty. Foucauldian analysis foregrounds the 'conduct of conduct,' a governmentality or system of beliefs steering people's actions, which aims at mobilizing the 'technologies of self' – that is, the policing of the