The Neoliberal City, Democracy and Participation

John Michael Roberts
Department of Social and Political Sciences
Brunel University
John.Roberts@brunel.ac.uk

This paper outlines some characteristics of neoliberalism and examines their impact upon the city and upon democracy and participation in urban spaces. The paper first maps out some themes of neoliberal ideals. Following this, and focusing in particular on the United Kingdom, it explores how neoliberalism has embedded itself in cities. The paper then discusses how neoliberalism employs a language of democracy and participation in order to draw people into its orbit. Four interrelated strategies are mapped out to demonstrate how neoliberalism achieves these goals. The final substantive section argues that counter-neoliberal strategies can be forged by ordinary community members in and against neoliberalism. The article concludes with some final thoughts.

Introduction

This paper outlines some characteristics of what has become known as neoliberalism and its impact upon the city. According to David Harvey, neoliberalism can be defined as the, 'maximisation of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterised by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets and free trade'.[1] Neoliberalism is equally characterised by its reliance on governments intervening in society to establish strong law and order policies and programmes to regulate the behaviour of groups considered to be 'deviants' in certain communities; for example, those on welfare benefits and those belonging to particular socio-cultural backgrounds, such as migrants.[2]

Neoliberalism also has significant consequences on democracy and participation in the public spaces of cities. For Mehta, public space 'refers to the access and use of space rather its ownership'.[3] On this estimation, public space can be privately owned, but publicly available, or it can be publicly owned but with access denied to the general public. Certainly, major cities have increasingly privatised their public space through the likes of new shopping centres and private housing schemes.[4] As a result, what was once public space is transformed into quasi-public space operated by private companies driven by profit motives. This, in turn, limits people's ability to

1   Harvey (2006), p. 45.
2   See also Bonefeld (2014).
3   Mehta (2014) p. 54.
4   Mitchell and Staeheli (2005).

gain access to these local public spaces for social or political activity, debate and discussion.[5]

In what follows, I will map out some themes associated with the captivating nature of neoliberal ideals along with their austere foundations. Following this, I look at how neoliberalism has embedded itself in cities by focusing, in particular, on the United Kingdom (UK). We will see that neoliberalism often employs the language of democracy and participation to make people receptive to neoliberal programmes. Four interrelated strategies are mapped out to demonstrate how neoliberalism achieves these goals. I then explore how counter-neoliberal strategies can be forged by ordinary community members in and against neoliberalism. The article concludes with some final thoughts.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an alluring ideology. It promises freedom, rewards for being competitive, entrepreneurial, and incentives to work with others to develop new ideas and projects. Self-interest is said by neoliberals to be a guiding personality trait in becoming competitive, and only through self-interest and competition can spontaneous order arise and social problems solved.[6] Free markets are built unhindered by interventionist welfare states, ensuring that finance is globally set free from government restrictions. Anti-inflationary policies safeguard neoliberal markets because they guard against wage-price spirals and overloaded governments.[7]

Neoliberals thus believe that while policies can be introduced to give advantages to business and global corporate interests (tax breaks being an obvious illustration), other policies need to be put in place to curb what are seen to be excessive wage demands by workers, trade unions and those in need.[8] In this respect, neoliberals attack the welfare state. In the UK, neoliberal policies have been employed to deregulate and privatise huge chunks of the public sector in the UK so that private investors can buy these up, or manage them, or invest in public services, or repackage them for other financial markets and investors.[9] Neoliberalism thus operates closely with the state in implementing an audit culture based on targets, internal markets, and internal competition within and between public services. Welfare recipients are, moreover, categorised by neoliberals as 'individual users' of state services and benefits and as 'consumers' of welfare services rather than as social classes who need protection from inevitable structural inequalities embedded in capitalist society. Those who require welfare benefits under neoliberalism must 'pay back' these benefits by making themselves attractive for the job market.[10] If welfare recipients challenge this neoliberal narrative, then they are often portrayed as being 'feckless' and 'workshy', unprepared to look after themselves, or live in an industrial past that no longer exists.[11]

For all of their rhetoric that free markets should not be unduly hindered by state intervention and regulation, neoliberals ironically employ a large amount of state intervention to achieve their goals. Arguably, it was Margaret Thatcher who gave neoliberalism a public global face during the late 1970s. As Thatcher consolidated power it soon became clear that her government wanted to promote free markets, lessen the grip of state control on particular parts of the economy, privatise as much as possible the welfare state and nationalised industries, and boost consumer choice and investments.[12] Global institutions have, however, also pushed forward a neoliberal mantra. For example, some in leading global institutions like the World Bank insist that while it is true that global free markets contain negative effects, these markets it nevertheless reduce poverty around the world especially if it operates in a 'humanitarian'

---

5   For a detailed discussion, see Roberts (2014), chapters 6 and 7.

6   Birch and Mykhnenko (2010), p. 3

7   Cerny (2008), pp. 18-20.

8   Farnsworth (2021).

9   Jessop (2010); Mirowski (2013).

10   Whitfield (2012).

11   Gough, et al. (2006).

12   Jessop (2002).

context through aid packages[13]; a call echoed in the 'softer' neoliberal rhetoric of Third Way politicians during in the 1990s, such as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroder in Germany, who sought to combine free market discourse with communitarian policies.

Importantly, neoliberalism has passed through many guises over the years and has adopted different forms depending which country one is examining. Eastern European neoliberalism that rapidly emerged after the fall of the Soviet-bloc, for instance, is markedly different to Scandinavian neoliberalism, which operates with vestiges of a welfare agenda. Today, of course, neoliberalism has evolved into an austerity agenda premised on reducing public spending and public deficits. The 2008 global financial crisis was employed by politicians to manufacture a type of fear in civil society that suggested 'we' in society would fall off a 'fiscal cliff' unless public spending was brought under control. At the same time, austerity policies have also included extending corporate tax breaks, underwriting the financialised economy, and protecting defence spending[14], while ordinary people have been encouraged to take out increasing amounts of credit and debt to fund their lifestyles. Debt, in many respects, has therefore been transformed into a 'lifestyle choice'. In June 2019 it was reported that the total consumer debt in the US, accumulated from the likes of credit cards, mortgages, auto loans, student loans, and so on, had reached $14 trillion. This represents an increase on the $13 trillion consumer debt in 2008 just before the great financial crash.[15]

Crucially, though, neoliberalism also encourages ordinary people to be active in their communities, to get a voice, and to participate in partnership networks. In many countries, neoliberalism is premised on developing formal and informal networks of information, communication and cooperation between local authorities, community groups, voluntary organisations (that include global as well as local voluntary bodies) and a variety of private bodies to solve and provide remedies for local, global and translocal problems and policy provisions. These 'public–private partnerships' (PPPs) are formed on the basis they enhance cooperation between different collaborators in delivering public services, are better value for money, and contract out services to the most effective business partners.[16] Neoliberalism has thus prospered by building a number of spatial initiatives and projects aiming to encourage the input of ordinary people in their communities to 'help out' in different initiatives. We now consider how this has come about.

Neoliberal Space in Cities

For some policy-makers, neoliberalism present real opportunities to 'rescale' citizenship at various levels and thus to tap into new ways of 'empowering' the democratic input of individuals as regards decision making. Indeed, mobilising an urban 'strategy' is a moment for policy-makers to bring together the public and the private. In this respect:

> The strategy process is a mechanism to make people talk about their fears and desires, and brainstorm and collect their ideas. The political and the non-political, the private and the public are deliberately blurred as strategy invites conversations about facts and values. Strategy spins a grand narrative where the personal idiosyncrasies of an individual captured on a sticky note are placed next to global issues. In the vision of the future, the social division of the 'I' and the 'we' appear to be overcome.[17]

'Strategy' therefore assembles community members to deliberate about the future of their immediate surrounding and where they live. One important neoliberal urban strategy is of course the need to market a city around an entrepreneurial image in order to attract private investment. But this is not a recent tactic. At least since 1945 major cities in the UK sought to redevelop their urban landscapes in part by attempts

---

13   Roberts (2004).

14   Jessop (2015); O'Leary (2020).

15   DeCambre (2019).

16   Lindsay, et al. (2008); Steijn, et al. (2011).

17   Kornberger (2012), p. 99.

to entice businesses to invest their respective localities. By the 1960s this modernisation agenda had noticeably grown. As Shapely observes:

> Throughout the 1960s, city-centre redevelopment required the private sector to provide capital and expertise and the local authorities needed to work with them directly and indirectly in securing or leasing the land, agreeing to the designs and providing the infrastructure by developing roads, public transport facilities, and car parks. They joined hands in trumpeting the virtues of their respective cities. They were trying to secure investment, jobs, and income.[18]

With the arrival of neoliberalism, there was a noticeable shift in local strategy. In the UK, one of the more conspicuous transitions towards the use of an urban neoliberal strategy emerged through the Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980, which established Urban Development Corporations (UDCs). The stated aim of UDCs was to regenerate depressed urban cities through private finance or new modes of local governance and thus circumvent what neoliberals often said was the excessive bureaucratic place-making powers of local government. UDCs designated some sites in cities as being 'Enterprise Zones' that would grant business favourable conditions if they invested in these Zones. Increasingly the emphasis becomes one of wealth creation in cities and communities via market-based policies rather than the redistribution of wealth.[19] An important effect was to implant the ethos of competition and public-private partnerships into the heart of the public management of cities. Ironically, Enterprise Zones were being championed by the Thatcher government even when their results were far from positive. One survey published in 1984, 'found no differences between employment generation, investment activities, or production of companies in zones versus outside the zones'[20]. Even so, these new city programmes entrenched neoliberal ideals into the public management of UK city space.

Neoliberal development in urban space is also often conjoined to an ethos of public consultation in which the views of community members are sought about a specific redevelopment project. These days in many major cities across the globe, city planners and designers establish consultation groups with the expressed intent of including the views and opinions of those community members who will be affected by a building proposal or regeneration scheme. The rationale for making this move is to adopt a policy of inclusion and to deliver on the principle that everyone has a 'right to the city'. Certainly, these ventures can generate new profitable streams and also facilitate and produce networks for a number of stakeholders to become involved in social initiatives such as conservation, building and extending civic and community spaces, promoting security programmes, and supporting charities. But they can also divide cities into new competitive spaces, establish metrics and performance-related targets for social projects in urban places, and further the commercialisation of public spaces and amenities.[21]

Urban development agencies more generally have forged partnership networks with the heritage industry. It is understandable why this is the case. Cultural heritage is no longer a conservative and homogeneous spectacle serving the interests of elites, the wealthy, and the state, but rather is to a large extent co-created by consumers. Engaging with cultural heritage in a variety of ways, consumers will adapt and select elements of heritage that seem 'authentic' to their own everyday cultural experiences.[22] Yet, for critics, an increasing pressure for cities to sell themselves to speculators and investors in a competitive global marketplace has meant that the heritage industry has now become entwined in the need to increase profits by subverting people's history and transforming them into financial spectacles. As Murtagh, et al. observe: 'Heritage districts, museums and interpretation are now critical to urban regeneration strategies as cities attempt to reposition themselves in an increasingly competitive global economy'.[23] Some research suggests that heritage is often used by urban development bodies to foster property-led investment in a locality rather

---

18   Shapely (2011), p. 519.

19   Peck (1995); see also Peck and Theodore (2015).

20   Papke (1993), p. 47.

21   Elmedni, et al. (2018); Morçöl and Wolf (2010); Valli and Hammami (2021).

22   Harrison (2010).

23   Murtagh, et al (2017), p. 508.

than increase peoples' heritage being employed to widen networks of democracy and participation, local community resources and welfare needs of diverse groups.[24]

For Layard, these processes more broadly signal the transition from viewing public space as being comprised by multiplicity and diversity to one frequently planned through uniformity. Designers and planners often construct a unified and uniform 'masterplan' when thinking through about the regeneration of a public space, whether this is a city centre space or town space.[25] Layard argues that masterplans, similar to 'strategy' documents, reduce complexity and diverse needs in a public space to a single vision that has in the first instance been mapped out by designers, commercial interests, consultants, planning officials, and local authorities. Only then is the masterplan sent out for consultation with local community members. In other words, the terms of the debate around the masterplan have already been framed by consultants, etc., and only then forwarded onto ordinary community members for their comments. Importantly, a masterplan might set out proposals to purchase already existing buildings and land in an urban area in order to begin to put the masterplan into action. In the UK, local authorities have the power to enact compulsory purchase orders in order to identify buildings and land for redevelopments. A 'public interest' clause must be submitted to this effect by a local authority in order to justify purchasing the land. Since the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, local authorities only have to 'think that the acquisition will facilitate the carrying out of development, redevelopment or improvement'.[26] Once acquired, property developers and developers can the redesign the boundaries of a place, drawing up new boundaries, which provide a basis for determining who is allowed to be where.

Naturally, tangible benefits can flow to communities from these urban development ventures. Evidence suggests, for instance, that commercial partnership networks in cities operating alongside local authorities, community groups and third sector organisations can produce positive environmental and green outcomes for specific areas, such as gaining extra funds to invest in local parks.[27] According to the famous French social geographer, Henri Lefebvre, 'the right to the city' should however and ideally *empower* ordinary people to critique, 'centres of decision–making, wealth, power, of information and knowledge' in order to expand a number of rights: 'the right to meetings and gathering' in urban spaces…The right to the city therefore signifies a gathering together instead of a fragmentation. It does not abolish confrontations and struggles'.[28] For Lefebvre, the right to the city also takes account of the daily realities that people endure in urban life, such as social divisions, poverty, racism, and exclusions from forms of decent housing.[29] But Lefebvre is also attuned to how democratic rights to the city can be trumped by a dominant group of 'scientists, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers' who seek to impose their own order upon social spaces through the likes of architectural designs, symbols, codes and language.[30] Importantly, this dominant group can achieve these tasks by drawing in and draw upon the democratic aspirations of ordinary community members, but then subvert these democratic aspirations to the ambitions embedded in neoliberal strategies and masterplans. The next section demonstrates in more specific detail how neoliberalism achieves these aims and goals.

Democracy and Participation in Neoliberal Space

There are at least four ways in which in which the processes and practices discussed above can be said to obstruct and limit a democratic right to the city. First, neoliberalism pursues a certain consultation style that in facts acts to constrain and limit full democratic input by citizens into developments in cities. One concrete illustration of this point can be taken from Davies's study of urban governance and neoliberal austerity in the UK city of Leicester. The City Council in Leicester wanted to implement

24   Valli and Hammami (2021); Pendlebury, et al. (2023).

25   Layard (2010).

26   Cited in Layard (2010), p. 423.

27   Moore and Mell (2023).

28   Lefebvre (1996), p. 195.

29   See also Harvey (2008), p. 23.

30   Lefebvre (1991), pp. 38–9.

austerity cuts to local services. But to off-set local community resistance to these cuts, the City Council first launched a programme initiative for transforming neighbourhood services so as to lessen the impact of cuts in communities. Some local services, like libraries, were merged into single hubs so as to enhance their 'competences'. The programme was also divided into six programme areas across Leicester. The rationale here from officials in the City Council was 'to roll out the programme in the least challenging areas and draw lessons that could then be applied in more quarrelsome neighbourhoods'.[31] Importantly, in terms of community voices, the City Council also organised a number of public consultations about the nature of the programme. Naturally, there would be deliberative rules at each public consultation. Opinions and views of local community members would, moreover, be listened to by Council officials. Behind these deliberative forums, however, lay a consciously planned austerity agenda pursued by Leicester City Council, which was based, in part, on fragmenting and fracturing community 'resistance' to the austerity cuts. By splitting the programme into six programme city areas, the Council could selectively present changes to local populations and thereby spatially separate out potential utterances of dissent to local neoliberal austerity.[32]

Second, redevelopment agendas in towns and cities are mediated through cultural and symbolic resources, which reproduce and add new dimensions to power relations in public spaces. Some studies show how brand and place-marketing consultants are employed by local officials to help to re-design spaces in a city or town. Sometimes, they do so by 'guiding' local officials 'behind the scenes' to adapt certain social and cultural narratives and representations in local policy urban development agendas and initiatives. These social and cultural markers can then shape and mould the 'reality' in and around urban development agendas, 'to the point where the brand identity they manufacture in the shared cultural space seems natural and authentic'.[33] While neo-communitarian community initiatives and deliberative forums will be established around urban developments, their content is already have been directed by the cultural narratives of place marketeers.[34]

Third, under a neoliberal, privatisation agenda, more public space and public parks are being sold off to commercial developers, or made into event spectacles for the likes of pop concerts. In turn, this limits the democratic potential on offer to citizens within those places.[35] For some, then, a business-minded urbanism has become dominate in discussions about city public space and city public parks based on 'the notion of entrepreneurialism as the inevitable urban development strategy for the 21st century'.[36] Commercialisation of public spaces and parks also negatively affects democratic rights in public space and parks. As Loughran observes: 'In wealthy, predominantly white sections of the contemporary city, "entrepreneurial" public parks… create both the subject of citizen-consumer…and a heavily (if discreetly) surveilled, de-politicized public realm'.[37] This commercialisation of public space therefore places new limits on free expression in UK public space. Those wealthy few that come to privately own and control public space are not legally bound by Articles 10 and 11 of the UK Human Rights Act – freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. So, for example, if a private landlord refused to grant permission to protest on privately owned land, this cannot be challenged under the Huan Rights Act.[38]

Fourth, digital surveillance often mediates these processes into further spaces of social division. As Arrigo and Shaw note, state police and enforcement agencies can track political and social activists through the latter's use of social media.[39] The authorities can then work with private security agencies to code the behaviour of activists and generate ideal-typical evaluations and profiles of them. These evaluations and profiles are used in some cases to pre-empt the behaviour of suspected acti-

---

31   Davies (2021). p. 160.

32   Davies (2021), p. 161.

33   Warren, et al. (2021), p. 9.

34   see also Gerometta, et al (2005).

35   Smith (2019).

36   Gabriel (2016), p. 278

37   Loughran (2014), p. 51; see also Gimson (2017).

38   Drucker and Gumpert (2015).

39   Arrigo and Shaw (2023).

vists. Police in America have been known to monitor the hashtags and other social media use by Black Lives Matter participants. 'Black Identity Extremist' classifications and evaluations emerge from this monitoring, which are then employed by the police to pre-empt the behaviour of 'suspected' BLM activists.

Without doubt, this form of pre-emptive coding of activism is a response, in part, to relatively new waves of social and political movements occupying public space in novel ways. Notably, existing monuments celebrating past events and figures of the powerful have been re-appropriated in the present by those seeking to open up new dialogical avenues to histories once suppressed. Unsurprisingly, then, there have also been public debates across the UK in recent on the historical significance of certain monuments and statues in public spaces. Most notably, the statue of Edward Colston (1636-1721) in the UK city of Bristol, a merchant and slave trader, was toppled from its plinth by anti-racist protestors in June 2020. Such acts of protest can of course be interpreted as criminal by some, or as acts of free expression that raise questions about which groups in society are given worth and value.[40] In all of these instances, heritage generally, and monuments in particular, become sites for contested memories of the past for the present, and how the present can reimagine the past. We now move on to consider these points.

Counter-Neoliberal Strategies

For Lefebvre, as we have already seen, 'the right to the city' is built on the emergence of a plethora of rights and entitlements that go beyond abstract liberal rights embodied in common phrases like 'the rights of man'. Instead, the right to the city emerges from popular culture and popular experiences of living in the city and takes account of the daily realities that people endure in urban life: social divisions, poverty, racism, and exclusions from forms of housing. But 'the right to the city' also focuses on how different people come together not only to socialise in their communities through social and cultural events, but also how they connect politically to advocate and campaign for greater urban rights. Accordingly, notes David Harvey, to transform our lives in cities for the better implies working with others and 'exercising collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization'.[41]

Often, the idea that public space is being remoulded in the image of business therefore gives us only part of the story. Without doubt, there is an increasing pressure on authorities to transform spaces and parks into commercialised spaces and thereby to increase the exchange-value of space. At the same time, different groups and interests have their own visions about the use-value of such space that often go against the needs of commercial interests. As Mitchell suggests: 'To put all this another way: at the beginning of the 1990s, public space simultaneously seemed to be being closed down – brought to an end – through the pressurizing forces of order, quality-of-life and protest policing, and privatization (in its many guises)' Yet, neo-liberalism inadvertently opened up 'through the concerted struggles of "new social movements" the invention of new modes of urban sociability'.[42]

Mitchell is alluding to the importance of public space historically being a visible place for those who do not normally gain exposure, but who nevertheless gain a voice and get their opinions heard. 'Women, non-whites, queer, disabled, and lower-class bodies and voices have been excluded from public spaces and democratic involvement throughout US history', claims Parson. 'Yet the inclusion of these bodies into the political community first occurred through the occupation and claiming of public space'.[43] Commercialisation of public space often sets in motion opportunities for ordinary to redefine what the 'public' is, or at least should be. Campaigns against commercialisation always have the potential to mobile ordinary people in socio-political formations that then 'resist', or at least 'dissent' against business, state or local authority conceptions of publicness.

There are different ways that community members can assert their rights to the city

---

40   Beech and Jordan (2021).

41   Harvey (2008), p. 23.

42   Mitchell (2016), p. 507.

43   Parson (2015), p. 348.

in and against neoliberal rights. One route to do so is through a shrewd use of the law to claim back public space from neoliberal ideals. A case in point is a UK study carried out by Hubbard and Lees. They examined a public inquiry into the application of a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) by the Notting Hill Housing Estate to acquire four blocks of housing on the Aylesbury Estate in Southwark, south-east London. At the subsequent inquiry between April to October in 2015, brought about by Aylesbury Leaseholder's Action Group, objections were raised to the granting of the CPO. Among the objections included: a failure to ensure affordable social rented housing would be built to replace the demolished housing stock; lack of guarantees that the scheme would promote the social wellbeing of the area; the failure of the Acquiring Authority to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment in relation to the leaseholders; and the suggestion that the CPO breached the human rights of the leaseholders. The planning inspector sided with the objections, and refused permission to grant the CPO because too many negative effects for the community would transpire if the scheme went ahead. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government agreed with this decision, and noted that the CPO went against the human rights of the residents, such as the right to a private and family life. 'Issues such as the "dislocation from family life" and the potential to harm the education of affected children were also identified in the decision letter, indicating a much wider approach to assessing the impacts of a CPO than had been the case previously'.[44]

Of course, such counter-neoliberal strategies in cities are but one type. Others include reclaiming statues, monuments and buildings for people's history, using parks to stage free speech rallies, or ordinary people coming together to campaign for the public recognition of their own heritage in urban spaces.[45] Simply coming together through these practices is one way that ordinary people can protect common spaces from the more negative consequences of neoliberalism. In London, the most iconic place for people to gather within to exercise free speech is in the north-east corner of Hyde Park. Known as Speakers' Corner, this place for free speech in London is rooted in the infamous Tyburn hanging tree where up until 1783 onlookers would regularly hear 'last dying speeches'. This space was then occupied by generations of activists from a multitude of social and cultural backgrounds canvassing for free speech and other rights. Hundreds still regularly attend Speakers' Corner today (see Picture 1). Next to Speakers' Corner is the Marble Arch monument. Marble Arch was constructed in 1833 to celebrate the triumphs of Lord Nelson and Duke of Wellington and to form an entrance to Buckingham Palace. The Arch was too narrow for the Palace, so in 1850 it was removed and reconstructed as the entrance to Hyde Park's north-east corner. Marble Arch thereby became infused with those exercising free speech rights in Hyde Park. Protestors still assemble at Marble Arch for demonstrations, the most recent being protests against the Israel-Gaza conflict during 2023-24 (See Picture 2).[46]

Importantly, the regular gatherings and practices of democracy at these well-known London spaces ensure they remain part of a London people's history of popular rights in the present. In turn, these acts by ordinary people place a constraint to a certain degree upon the authorities and their potential endeavours to commercialise these spaces of dissent. In many respects, these established heritage sites for democratic gatherings provide a blueprint for similar albeit different and novel sites of protest to suddenly emerge at particular points in time. Following the 2008-9 global financial crisis, over 2,000 people descended to Zuccotti Park near Wall Street, New York, to occupy public space and to protest against the wealthiest 1% in US society. What soon became known as the Occupy Movement then spread across the globe in places as far apart as Armenia, Belgium, Brazil, Hong Kong, Malaysia, France, and the UK. These multitude of protestors thus momentarily revived the importance to build democratic links between one another and do so through well-known and publicly visible urban spaces, much like earlier generations of activists had achieved in places like Hyde Park.

---

44   Hubbard and Lees (2018), p. 16.

45   See Price and Sabido (2016).

46   On Hyde Park as a place for protest, see Roberts (2023).

Figure 1: *Participants at Speakers' Corner, Hyde Park, London. (Picture taken by John Roberts).*

What all these and many other examples show is that there is not something called public space per se., but different emergent publics that are constantly being made and re-made through the likes of networks, groups, associations, language, objects, and images. There are therefore many 'publics' in one unique place: some will resist neoliberalism, some will not, while others will do so partially.[47] Publics are often made and re-made through 'territorial' claims within a place, whether it is activists campaigning for a social or political cause volunteers marking out a heritage trail, young people sitting on a bench, older people playing bowls, sports communities using green places to play sport, and so on.

---

47   Brighenti (2010).

Figure 2: *Antiwar demonstrators assemble at the Marble Arch monument, 11 November 2023 (Picture taken by John Roberts).*

Conclusion

Cities across the world have heritage sites and spaces – public parks, public squares, monuments, buildings, and so forth – which are also symbolic rallying points for protests and demonstrations. More recent cycles of activism, such as Occupy and the Arab Spring, show in a dramatic and visible sense the importance for ordinary people to assemble in these heritage places for their mass protests. Indeed, such places more often than not already have a historical and symbolic importance in the political culture of a city. While these sites therefore become focal points for spectacular levels of activism and mass movements, they also gain their identity as popular heritage places over many years for small- and medium-scale events of dissent, gaining public awareness about a particular cause, artistic performances to promote a specific social or political issue, leafleting, being starting points or end points for one-off marches and rallies, and so on.

Through time, heritage sites can therefore act as meeting points in a city for ordinary people to gain a dissenting voice in the public sphere, and, sometimes, social and political spaces are recognised years later as important heritage landmarks. Authorities that maintain a heritage site will of course have to negotiate the right of people to exercise peaceful democratic activity within the site in question, while still maintaining and developing the site's cultural heritage identity. Research has been carried out on symbolic places of protests and on how such places have been managed by particular authorities and bodies. However, there needs to be more research on how those who attend such sites to exercise their democratic rights, such as that of free speech, re-interpret and represent the cultural heritage of the site in question exactly as a place for popular democratic inclusion in civil society. At the same time, we need to make more enquiries on the work and views of those officials who, among other things, develop and manage the cultural heritage of a specific site. To what extent do these officials successfully implement their own and the government's policy agenda on cultural heritage within a specific site, while also responding to the democratic claims of ordinary people to use the site as a place to exercise rights to the city?

References

Arrigo, B. and Shaw, O. P. (2023) 'The De-realization of Black Bodies in an Era of Mass Digital Surveillance: A Techno-criminological Critique', *Theoretical Criminology* 27(2): 265-282.

Birch, K. and Mykhnenko, V. (2010) Introduction: A world turned right way up' in K. Birch and V. Mykhnenko (eds) *The rise and fall of neoliberalism*, London: Zed, pp 1-20.

Beech, D. and Jordan, M. (2021) 'Toppling Statues, Affective Publics and the Lessons of the Black Lives Matter Movement', *Art and the Public Sphere* 10(1): 3-15.

Bonefeld, W. (2014) *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*, London: Bloomsbury.

Brighenti, A. M. (2010) 'The Publicness of Public Space: On the Public Domain', *Quaderni del Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale*, Università di Trento, 49: 7-47, available at: http://eprints.biblio.unitn.it/1844/1/quad49.pdf.

Cerny, P. G. (2008) 'Embedding Neoliberalism: The Evolution of a Hegemonic Paradigm', *The Journal of International Trade and Diplomacy* 2(1): 1-46.

Davies, J. S. (2021) *Between Realism and Revolt: Governing Cities in the Crisis of Neoliberal Globalism*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.

DeCambre, M. (2019) 'U.S. Consumer Debt is Now Above Levels Hit during the 2008 Financial Crisis', *MarketWatch* 25 June, available at: https://www.marketwatch.com/amp/story/guid/771B18E2-92A9-11E9-9D89-429213C87F49?__twitter_impression=true.

Drucker, S. and Gumpert, G. (2015) 'The Unsquared Square or Protest and Contemporary Publics', *First Amendment Studies* 49(2): 138-149.

Elmedni, B., Christian, N. and Stone, C. (2018) 'Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): And Economic Development Policy or Tool for Gentrification?' *Cogent Business and Management* 5(1): 1-19.

Farnsworth, K. (2021) 'Retrenched, Reconfigured and Broken: The British Welfare State After a Decade of Austerity', *Social Policy and Society* 20(1): 77-96.

Gabriel, N. (2016) '"No Place for Wilderness": Urban Parks and the Assembling of Neoliberal Urban Environmental Governance', *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 19(September): 278-284.

Gerometta J., Häussermann H., Longo G. (2005) 'Social Innovation and Civil Society in Urban Governance: Strategies for an Inclusive City', *Urban Studies*, 42(11): 2007-2021.

Gimson, S. (2017) Square Bashing: English Cities are Giving Away Basic Democratic Rights When They Sell Off Management of Central Streets, Our Report Shows', *Index on Censorship* 46(4): 15-18

Gough, J., Eisenschitz, A., and McCulloch, A. (2006) *Spaces of social exclusion*, London: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (2006) 'Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 88(2): 145-158.

Harrison, R. (2010) *Understanding the Politics of Heritage*, Mancher: Manchester University Press.

Harvey, D. (2008) 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review* 53(Sept-Oct): 23-40.

Hubbard, P. and Lees, L. (2018) 'The Right to Community?' *City* 22(1): 8-25.

Jessop, B. (2002) *The Future of the Capitalist State*, Cambridge: Polity.

Jessop, B. (2010) 'From Hegemony to Crisis? The Continuing Ecological Dominance of Neoliberalism' in K. Birch and V. Mykhnenko (eds) *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism*, London: Zed

Jessop, B. (2015) 'Variegated Capitalism and the Political Economy of Austerity', in R. Westra, D. Badeen and R. Albritton (eds), *The Future of Capitalism After the Financial Crisis*, London: Routledge.

Kornberger, M. (2012) 'Governing the City: From Planning to Urban Strategy', *Theory, Culture and Society* 29(2): 84-106.

Layard, A. (2010) 'Shopping in the Public Realm: A Law of Place', *Journal of Law and Society* 37(3): 412-441.

Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, H. (1996) *Writings on Cities*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Lindsay, C., McQuaid, R. W., and Dutton, M. (2008) 'Inter-agency Cooperation and New Approaches to Employability', *Social Policy and Administration* 42(7): 715-732.

Loughran, K. (2014) 'Parks for Profit: The High Line, Growth Machines, and the Uneven Development of Urban Public Spaces', *City & Community* 13(1): 49–68.

Mehta, V. (2014) 'Evaluating Public Space', *Journal of Urban Design* 19(1): 53–88.

Mirowski, P. (2013) *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, London: Verso

Mitchell, D. (2016) 'People's Park Again: On the End and Ends of Public Space', *Environment and Planning A* 49(3): 503–518.

Morçöl, G. and Wolf, J. F. (2010) 'Understanding Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): A New Governance Framework', *Public Administration Review* 70(6): 906–913.

Moore, L and Mell, I. (2023) 'Examining the Role of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) as Contemporary Alternatives for Green Infrastructure Funding in London, UK', *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 83: 127904.

Mitchell, D. and Staeheli, L. (2005) 'Permitting Protest: Parsing the Fine Geography of Dissent in America', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29: 796–813.

Murtagh, B., Boland, P. and Shirlow, P. (2017) 'Contested Heritages and Cultural Tourism', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23(6): 506–520.

O'Leary, T. (2020a) 'Record Low Growth and Worse to Come. Boris Johnson is Not "Deficit-Financing Growth"', *Socialist Economic Bulletin*, 12 March, available at: https://www.socialisteconomicbulletin.net/2020/03/record-low-growth-and-worse-to-come-boris-johnson-is-not-deficit-financing-growth.

Papke, L. E. (1993) 'What Do We Know about Enterprise Zones?' in J. M. Poterba (ed) *Tax Policy and the Economy*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Parson, S. (2015) 'Parks, Permits, and Riot Police: San Francisco Food Not Bombs and Autonomous Occupations of Space', *New Political Science* 37(3): 346–362.

Peck, J. (1995) 'Moving and Shaking: Business Elites, State Localism and Urban Privatism', *Progress in Human Geography* 19(1): 16–46.

Peck, J. and Theodore, N. (2015) *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Pendlebury, J., Veldpaus, L. and Garrow, H. (2023) 'Relationality, Place Governance and Heritage: The Lower Ouseburn Valley, Newcastle upon Tyne and 'Ouseburnness',*Planning Practice and Research* 38(3): 409–424.

Price, S. and Sabido, R.S. (eds.) (2016) *Sites of Protest*, London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Roberts, J. (2010) 'The State, Empire and Imperialism', *Current Sociology* 58(6): 833–858.

Roberts, J.M. (2023) 'Assemblies, Coalitions, and Conflicts Over Free Speech: From "Trespass" to "Encroachment" in Urban Space at Hyde Park, London, 1861–1962', *Antipode* 55(3): 916–934.

Shapely, P. (2011) 'The Entrepreneurial City: The Role of Local Government and City-centre Redevelopment in Post-war Industrial English Cities', *Twentieth Century British History* 22(4): 498–520.

Smith, A. (2019) 'Justifying and Resisting Public Park Commercialisation: The Battle for Battersea Park', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 26(2): 171–185.

Steijn, B, Klijn, E-H, and Edelenbos, J. (2011) 'Public-private Partnerships: Added Value by Organizational Form or Management?', *Public Administration* 89(4): 1235-1252.

Valli, C. and Hammami, F. (2021) 'Introducing Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Sweden: A Social Justice Appraisal', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 28(2): 155–172.

Warren G., Dilmperi A., Dinnie K. (2021). Power Struggles and Playing Politics: An Application of Bourdieu's Cultural Intermediation Theory to Place Marketing', *Annals of Tourism Research* 91: 103276.

Whitfield, D. (2012) *In Place of Austerity*, Nottingham: Spokesman.

THE NEOLIBERAL CITY, DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION