

Resisting and reinforcing neoliberalism

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In the context of the ongoing global intertwined financial, environmental, socio-political crises, the intricate relationship between neoliberal urban planning and the challenges these crises present has become increasingly visible. Despite these challenges, neoliberal restructuring justifications remain central to urban agendas and planning culture, often exacerbating social inequality. Its principles and related political decisions frequently intensify social conflicts, sparking protests as their adverse effects on marginalized communities and areas become evident, especially after decades of market-driven policies and the global financial crisis. In many cities around the globe, these popular rebellions, as local and residential activism, started increasingly to target varying regulatory regimes and strategies pursued by supranational, national, or local authorities, often organized as urban social movements.

This think piece examines how neoliberal urbanism simultaneously incites resistance and absorbs it, reflecting a paradox where insurgent practices challenge the system but are also co-opted into its framework. By exploring key dynamics in urban governance, participation, and social movements, it seeks to understand how neoliberalism's resilience lies in its ability to incorporate dissent into its operating logic while marginalizing radical alternatives, so to perpetuate its dominance despite widespread opposition. Briefly mentioning some examples of organized groups and forms of resistance around the globe, theoretical debates, and historical perspectives, the discussion unfolds by: analyzing how neoliberal practices shape urban governance and planning; investigating how movements resist neoliberalism and how their ideas are co-opted; addressing the enduring struggle over "to whom the city belongs" and proposing ways to foster meaningful democratic engagement.

Keywords: neoliberal urbanism, urban social movements, co-optation, post-political city, agonistic urbanism, democracy

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The legacy of neoliberal urbanism

After decades of neoliberal urbanisation, the mechanisms of neoliberal urban planning are well-documented, emphasizing market-driven growth, public-private partnerships, and competitive city branding as preferred strategies to stimulate economic development and urban growth in increasingly indebted cities (Harvey, 1989; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009). Yet, policies designed to attract global capital often sideline the needs of marginalized populations, exacerbating urban inequalities (Marcuse, 2010; Sisson et al., 2019). While these strategies are framed as solutions to urban crises, they have deepened social fractures, as seen in contested urban renewal projects, including large-scale gentrification and privatization initiatives, based on speculative real estate markets interests, that have ultimately commodified urban space and displaced long-standing communities (Lees, Shin, and López-Morales, 2016; Aalbers, 2020). Critics such as Harvey (2012) and Brenner and Theodore (2002) highlight that neoliberalism reshapes cities into spaces of capital accumulation, leaving residents to grapple with its social and spatial consequences, eventually generating a mistrust of city's inhabitants towards policymakers and institutional actors' intentions (Purcell, 2002). Incorporating democratic rhetoric and practices it legitimizes itself and its "democratic deficit" (Purcell, 2009) creating the illusion of inclusion while maintaining top-down control.

Contemporary scholars argue that the resilience of neoliberalism lies in its adaptability, for instance dealing with communities that are willing to take risks to claim social, civil, and political rights creating conflicting relationships between space and social groups in constant evolution (Rossi and Vanolo, 2012). Policies that integrate elements of participation and community input often serve to legitimize existing power structures rather than foster genuine democratic engagement (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner, 2013). The promotion of "smart cities" exemplifies this trend, where technological innovations are celebrated as neutral tools for urban management while sidelining discussions about equity and inclusion (Cardullo, Di Felicianantonio, & Kitchin, 2019).

Housing is particularly relevant to these discussions, as it embodies both the material and symbolic dimensions of neoliberal urbanism, serving as a site where market-driven logics intersect with deeply entrenched social hierarchies, shaping access to resources and reproducing inequality, amplifying social polarization and reinforced hierarchies of power. Scholars such as Madden and Marcuse (2016) have critically examined how housing has been transformed into a commodity under neoliberalism, linking the global housing crisis to broader urban inequalities driven by market-driven planning and policies. This critical analysis became a crucial resource for understanding the intersection of neoliberal urbanism and housing struggles. The analysis of these dynamics contributes to detecting a growing democratic deficit, as urban governance becomes more aligned with the interests of global elites than with the everyday realities of disenfranchised populations (Purcell, 2009).

The role of urban social movements

Urban social movements (USMs) have been at the forefront of resisting neoliberal urban policies. From the housing rights movements in Barcelona (Colau & Alemany, 2014; Martínez, 2018, 2019) to anti-gentrification movements in Berlin (Holm, 2020; Tajeri, 2019; Ginwala, Kirn, Tajeri, 2020); to anti-eviction campaigns in New York and Los Angeles (Fields and Hodkinson, 2018). Moreover, several urban social movements opposing the privatization of parts of the city became increasingly relevant aftereffects of wide privatizations became more visible. These groups have been organizing against civic policies, projects, and regulatory measures, considered detrimental to the city's public space or heritage, seen as a "common

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goods” to be defended. It encompasses groups of citizens defending or reclaiming public spaces, services or green areas proposing co-/self-management against privatization or destruction (e.g., Hammani et al., 2022; Pask, 2010; for the case of Teatro Valle in Rome see Giardini et al., 2012; for the case of Gezi Park in Istanbul see Tugal, 2013; for the case of Bethanien in Berlin see Rossini, 2024 contribution in this volume). This included forms of community resistances and struggles for citizen participation to the political nature of urban redevelopment processes (e.g., the case of the “Media Spree” and “Tempelhof” protests in Berlin see Ahlfeldt, 2011 and Hilbrandt, 2017; for the “Can Battló” case in Barcelona or the “Snia Lake” in Rome see Rossini & Bianchi, 2019).

Such activism builds on earlier frameworks of urban insurgency (Castells, 1983) and expands them by incorporating new organizational tools (De Nardis & Antonazzo, 2017), using various state-driven mechanisms to advance their causes and transnational networks (Nicholls, Miller & Beaumont, 2013; Mayer, 2000, 2020). Moreover, the concept of “insurgent urban citizenship” (Holston, 2007) has evolved in the context of global urban conflicts, where marginalized groups claim their right to the city by opposing displacement, privatization, and exclusion. Examples from South America and Asia demonstrate how these struggles intersect with broader debates on environmental justice and climate resilience (Anguelovski, 2013). Movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion (Berglund & Schmidt 2020) illustrate how urban conflicts increasingly address the intersectionality of social, economic, and ecological concerns.

Recent studies highlight the interplay between grassroots resistance and urban development strategies’ co-optation. For example, in Berlin, Holm and Kuhn (2011) document how forms of participation and caution urban renewal, developed by the squatter movement in Berlin, have been incorporated into the software of urban development models. These alternative urban renewal policies were later incorporated into mainstream governance frameworks, including examples like the cooptation of radical or spontaneous grassroots strategies of alternative use of vacant spaces transformed into “temporary uses” practices in urbanism and coopted in city branding strategies (Colomb, 2012). While these proposals initially resisted market-driven development, their adoption often diluted their radical potential, transforming them into tools for legitimizing existing power dynamics. In this framework, the creative mobilization of ideas from citizens and new market actors can be seen by urban planners as catalysts of “urban renaissance” (Porter & Shaw, 2009) and mobilized for alternative strategies of urban regeneration. Yet, these movements are often hijacked both in “benign programs emerged that would seek to incorporate precarious or impoverished groups as well as areas into upgrading schemes, and “creative city” policies made use of precarious artists and Isubleultural. occasionally even insurgent, activism for local marketing and upgrading strategies. Hijacking a sclection or how social movement claims, upwardly mobile cities would com- pete for top places in the global competition by branding themselves as diverse sustainable, and green.” (Mayer, 2016, 220). Under the rhetoric of the “Big Society”, these voluntary, non-profit, and business actors are hijacked through the state withdrawal as potential alternatives for local administrations to provide certain public service, effectively compelling these organizations to fill the resulting gaps. This shift led to concerns that the Big Society agenda¹ was, in practice, a means to reduce state responsibility under the guise of

¹ The Big Society was a sociopolitical concept for a redefinition of the relationship between citizens and the state. Prominent during the first 15 years of the 21st century, it was developed by the populist strategist Steve Hilton. It aimed to merge free market economics with a conservative paternalist vision of the social contract, drawing inspiration from the civic conservatism of David Willetts in the 1990s. The concept significantly shaped the 2010 UK Conservative Party general election manifesto and informed the legislative agenda of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government. Its stated objectives included: empowering communities through localism

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promoting civic participation. Critics argued that this approach risked undermining both state structures and civil society by overburdening voluntary organizations without providing adequate support or resources (LSE Politics and Policy, 2011; Local Government Association, 2010).

Grassroots demands for equity and justice versus Governmentalisation

Urban development in the neoliberal era has been shaped by a profound tension between market-driven imperatives and grassroots demands for equity and justice. Contemporary conflicts over space often emerge as reactions to policies that prioritize growth and competitiveness over social inclusion; the proliferation of “urban mega-projects” and the rise of financialized urban governance (Moulaert, Rodríguez & Swyngedouw 2003; Aalbers, 2020) have intensified these tensions, as cities increasingly cater to global capital at the expense of local communities. In this tension-filled landscape, conflicting interests, opinions, and values surrounding the production of urban space (Lefebvre, 1974), participatory governance mechanisms often exclude radical or minority perspectives, reinforcing the dominance of elite interests (Mouffe, 2000; Purcell, 2008) exacerbating urban conflicts. The question, “To whom does the city belong?”, lies at the core of these conflicts.

Public spaces, traditionally regarded as arenas for democratic engagement, are increasingly subjected to privatization and securitization, restricting access for marginalized groups (Sorkin, 1992; Davies, 1998; Chaplin and Holding, 1998; Bryman, 2004; Shaw & Hudson, 2009; among others). Simultaneously, significant portions of the population face displacement from areas they have long called home, further exacerbating social and spatial inequalities. The resulting conflicts have intensified calls for a democratic reckoning over urban governance challenging its democratic legitimacy and ethical dimensions, failing to deliver outcomes that are equitable, just or environmentally sustainable. However, these demands often encounter resistance through coercive repression, containment of urban insurgent practices, or their co-optation. On the other hand, the increasingly pervasive “governmentalization” of urban life has situated citizens within a specific governmental rationality, emphasizing a framework of rights, responsibilities, and duties. Michel Foucault's identification of “population” as the focal point of modern governmental rationality underscores this shift, highlighting the rise of self-governing societies characterized by heightened awareness of entitlements and obligations (Imrie & Raco, 2000). This alignment of rights with responsibilities has far-reaching consequences, which may complement or contradict one another. As Rossi and Vanolo (2012) observe, these dynamics underscore the increasingly moralized nature of urban governance in advanced liberal societies. Citizen participation in the public sphere, coupled with the ideal of the “active citizen”, is promoted through an array of policies and regulations aimed at shaping the moral conduct of urban communities. These efforts focus on both collective and individual behavior, yet they often marginalize traditional goals of socio-economic emancipation and justice, despite ongoing struggles that continue to reference these principles.

This triggers citizens' engagement but at the same time deactivate its potential disruption, since the concept of the “political”, which refers to the antagonistic relations that are always

and devolution; promoting active participation in community life (volunteerism); shifting authority from central government to local authorities; supporting cooperatives, mutuals, charities, and social enterprises; Increasing government transparency by publishing data. This approach is based on the premise that the “big state” has not been effective and is economically unsustainable and sought to redefine governance by decentralizing power and encouraging civic engagement. The intention behind it is to move from a culture where people look to officials and government to solve their problems, to a culture where people solve the problems they face themselves aided by government.

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present in human society (Mouffe & Laclau, 1985), has been continuously neutralized, mainly through the adoption of “communicative action” and “consensus building” (Swyngedouw, 2009) while excluding minoritarian positions, radical differences, and conflictive dimensions. Yet it cyclically generates forms of ‘passive revolution’—a concept Gramsci used to describe ‘hegemony through neutralisation.’ This refers to situations in which demands that challenge the established hegemonic order are absorbed by the system in ways that satisfy their demands while neutralizing their subversive potential. According to his theory, neoliberalism maintains its hegemonic position precisely through this strategy: its capacity to co-opt and hijack potentially subversive alternative visions and counter-hegemonic discourses.

Conclusion: Towards agonistic urbanism

After few decades under neoliberal restructuring and the implementation of its strategies, we can observe how these neoliberal developments have led to an inability to address conflicting forms of insurgent citizenship (Rossini & Bianchi, 2019), underscoring the challenges of realizing the “agonistic” potential necessary to confront and legitimize everyday practices that could amplify urban plurality through real democratic engagement (Mouffe, 2000). The concept of “agonistic urbanism” (Mouffe, 2013) offers a potential pathway for addressing these conflicts. By embracing conflict as a productive force, agonistic urbanism challenges the neoliberal emphasis on consensus and depoliticization. This approach calls for recognizing and legitimizing diverse voices, particularly those of marginalized communities, as essential to shaping urban futures. Many academics have debated on this issue. For instance, in the article by Giulia Li Destri Nicosia and Laura Saija (2023) the application of political ontology in planning theory is examined. They focus on the contrasting Agamben’s perspective, that highlights the inherent violence within institutional norms, leading to a sense of despair regarding transformative possibilities, with the one of Esposito. This perspective suggests that by disentangling exclusionary aspects of norms from an affirmative biopolitics—what Esposito terms “instituting thought”²—it is possible to envision institutions as dynamic and inclusive entities. In fact, by advocating for “instituting thought,” Esposito (2021) conceptualizes social being as neither singular nor multiple but as intersected by the dual semantics of political conflict. This framework underscores the importance of ongoing processes that challenge and reshape existing political and social orders, fostering a space where new forms of communal life and governance can emerge.

In sum, the persistence of neoliberal urbanism amidst widespread critique underscores the need for alternative frameworks of urban governance to counteract the dynamics that reinforce its democratic deficit. Providing real opportunities and creating tools to negotiate and include real alternative visions, strategies, and practices means making thinkable—and sometimes possible—the confrontation between hegemonic and subaltern or excluded perspectives (e.g., degrowth strategies; see Rossini, 2024 in this volume). Such efforts aim to move toward more inclusive and equitable futures for cities. This requires a shift from tokenistic participation to meaningful engagement, where grassroots movements play an active role in shaping urban policies. Urban citizenship, in this sense, represents a significant resource due to its capacity

² Roberto Esposito, a prominent Italian philosopher, introduces the concept of “instituting thought” in his work *Instituting Thought: Three Paradigms of Political Ontology*. This concept serves as a third paradigm in political ontology, aiming to address the limitations found in the approaches of Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze. While Heidegger’s perspective is characterized by a “destituting” paradigm that emphasizes the negation or deactivation of politics, and Deleuze’s approach offers an “instituted” paradigm focusing on established structures, Esposito’s “instituting thought” seeks a dynamic and affirmative pathway. It emphasizes the continuous creation and re-creation of political and social structures through active engagement and praxis. This paradigm draws inspiration from the work of French political philosopher Claude Lefort, highlighting the role of instituting praxis in reconstructing a productive relationship between ontology and politics.

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to develop site-specific solutions (for instance, presenting alternatives of “Subsidiarity” with the state³ while avoiding the privatization of public spaces). Such initiatives should be actively supported and integrated into city governance without exploiting voluntary work or using it as a justification for the withdrawal of the state.

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³ The concept of “Subsidiarity” with the State is developed in the Rossini’s (2024) article included in this volume.

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