

**‘Actually-Existing’ Cities After Neoliberalism:
A Brief Rejoinder to Boyle et al¹**

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In their article, ‘The spatialities of actually existing neoliberalism in Glasgow, 1977 to present’, Mark Boyle, Christopher McWilliams and Gareth Rice (2008) usefully problematise our current understanding of neoliberal urbanism. Their re-examination is particularly timely. They attempt to refine the idea of neoliberalism in order to prevent it falling into conceptual disrepute as a hackneyed cliché that obscures rather than illuminates recent political economy and urban governance. In this they oppose a tendency to view the neoliberalisation of urban governance as ‘unidirectional, pure and hegemonic’ (p. 314). The much vaunted and much disputed case of Glasgow provides them with a ‘model laboratory’ for testing the conceptual coherence of ‘actually-existing neoliberalism’. Instructively, Boyle et al seek to move us beyond an accumulating pile of discrete studies of Glasgow and towards taking a more comprehensive and integrated perspective of neoliberal urbanism. Here the concept of ‘spatiality’ is required to perform much of the intellectual work in their ambition for totality.

Much of what they argue seems to us incontrovertible and likely to generate agreement. However, in this brief response we raise a couple of theoretical reservations about how their case is formulated and the way that empirical evidence is drawn from the Glasgow example. This derives from our own joint and separate studies of urban space and neoliberalism and detailed work on the Glasgow space economy over a number of years. Our response is aimed at developing a sympathetic but critical approach to Boyle et al's understanding of neoliberal urbanism as illustrated by the Glasgow example.

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In particular, the counterposing by Boyle et al of a 'hybrid, mutant' model to a 'pure' model of neoliberalism for us misrepresents existing models of neoliberalism as a perfectly finished object rather than a roughly mottled process. That they do not identify any 'pure' model leads them to create a straw construct against which they can claim a more sophisticated, refined approach to the messiness of neoliberal urbanism. In contrast, we view neoliberalism as a contested and unstable response to accumulation crises at various scales of analysis. In this neoliberalism has been productive of material effects, including the financialisation of the local economy as crisis management. Moreover, as a project of class recuperation and crisis management neoliberalism now finds itself in profound crisis.

As Boyle et al deftly outline, Glasgow provides a particularly salutary case study of these processes. Glasgow City Council, specifically the right wing of the local Labour Party, became an early proponent of neoliberal urbanism as a pragmatic vehicle to arrest decades of industrial decline and urban squalor. In the early 1980s it pioneered a post-industrial booster strategy for regeneration by re-branding the image of the city marked by a new penchant for urban acculturation freshly imported from the United States (Mooney, 2004). In such ways capital, especially service sector businesses, might be enticed to locate their functions in the city. In the process, it was hoped, the economic base of the city would revive. Wealth would flood into the city centre through services and retail before trickling down and out to refloat disadvantaged populations in the impoverished edge housing estates.

Such a mystical entrepreneurial conception of the market turned local planning into a facilitator of inward capital investment rather than a moderator for the public good. Boyle et al rightly point to the self-destructive character of competitive spatial policies, especially in the case of retail, where the initial locational attractions of city centre sites are irredeemably tarnished by capital's seemingly insatiable appetite for out of town behemoths. All the well known spatial advantages of centrality are undone by accumulation's interest in the economics and politics of dispersal. This is enjoined by the tighter regulation of Glasgow's deprived neighbourhoods in order to enhance social

cohesion and social order through 'capacity building' and networks of 'social capital' (Law and Mooney, 2006). A major initiative in this direction was the Housing Stock Transfer of 2003 that removed the massive portfolio of social housing in Glasgow from public control (Daly et al, 2005; Mooney and Poole, 2005). Given Glasgow's persistently dire record on indices of health, violence and poverty, three decades of trickle down economics have been judged a failure by critics. However, far from endorsing the idea of Glasgow as a 'dual city' (p. 317), one of us has had occasion to contest it as an adequate way of conceptualising socio-spatial polarisation in the city (Mooney and Danson, 1997; Danson and Mooney, 1998).

We share the general contours and much of the empirical detail of Boyle et al's sketch of Glasgow's dalliance with neoliberal urbanism. Our dissatisfaction stems from their analytical framing of neoliberalism. Of course, no single article can possibly cover everything. But conceptual frameworks always select some things for analysis and exclude still other things. Here Boyle et al rely on Peck and Tickell's (1994, 2002) characterisation of 'roll-back neoliberalism' and 'roll-out neoliberalism'. 'Roll-back neoliberalism', popularised as Thatcherism or Reaganism after its leading protagonists in the 1980s, refers to the first wave of destructive and deregulatory attacks on the state and the liberalisation of 'free' markets as the solution to crisis conditions. 'Roll-out neoliberalism' of the 1990s and 2000s is viewed as the consolidation of the changed conditions for capital accumulation through the pragmatic invention of new, often indirect regulatory rewards and punishments, encapsulated in the UK by New Labour ideas about the Third Way. This double movement of anti-state deregulation and pro-market re-regulation is not especially unique to neoliberalism but repeats a signature theme of capitalism from its earliest days (Polanyi, 1944).

As Boyle et al (p. 323) gloss the schema of Peck and Tickell, alongside capital's (unspecified) needs the main thrust of roll-out neoliberalism 'is to direct market relations to produce more socially useful outcomes'. For us this represents a serious misrecognition of the highly selective regulation and reconstitution of market forces. Elsewhere we have developed a parallel

analysis of the shift from 'naked neoliberalism' to 'social neoliberalism' in the marketised and managerial welfare state (Law and Mooney, 2007: 164-8). There we identify an overriding purpose for social neoliberalism in exploiting the latent value of labour power through flexibility, managerialism and social orderliness rather than (again unspecified) 'socially useful outcomes'. This is never a complete, finished process. Social neoliberalism always involves actually existing struggles to dominate and control. It never relied on a 'pure' economic moment of market or workplace domination but entered the world at a conjunctural moment of accumulation crisis, felt acutely in former industrial growth poles like Glasgow. It helped give definitional shape and meaning to a class-specific diagnostics for temporarily resolving contradictions inherited from earlier rounds of place-bound accumulation.

Neoliberalism is therefore not only an essentially contested concept; it is also an essentially contested reality (Leitner, Peck and Sheppard, 2007). Peck and Tickell allow some potential for localised instability and challenges to neoliberal governance, albeit within an overall scheme of neoliberal resilience and capacity to absorb shocks. However, resistance to neoliberalism need not be limited, as Peck and Tickell suggest, to internal, localised reforms, largely divorced from wider social movements or political processes, while the circuits of capital are seen as free to routinely upscale its activities (Sites, 2007). On the other hand, dissent and resistance to neoliberalism within Glasgow is relegated by Boyle et al, reduced to a cursory discussion of the limited Workers City campaign. Missing from their account is the need for a sustained, varied discussion of trades unions, community groups, alternative local media like the arts magazine *Variant* (banned by Culture & Sport Glasgow, see Variant Affinity Group, 2008), radical cultural activists, single issue campaigns for instance over road-building, or the housing stock transfer, or around school or hospital or swimming pool closures (McNeish, 1999; Mooney and Fyfe, 2006; McCafferty and Mooney, 2009; Poole and Mooney, 2006). Such points of public contention are highly significant for assessing the multifarious spatial outcomes of neoliberal urbanism.

Ideological claims made by the proponents of social neoliberalism about urban sustainability cannot be accepted at face value. Neither can the claim made by Boyle et al that roll-out neoliberalism might 'secure for capitalism a regulatory framework of some durability' (p. 323). For Boyle et al (p. 324) this expected longevity arises from the claim that neoliberal urbanism 'does not amount to a pure and coordinated project'. Their major conclusion is that neoliberalism cannot adequately convey the messiness of urban policy even in the case of Glasgow, which is widely assumed to be an exemplary instance. 'In Glasgow, neoliberalism has interlaced with historical structures, ideologies and policies with particular path trajectories to produce a complex series of hybrids which at times do not look particularly neoliberal at all' (p. 323). But, at the same time as disclaiming the force of neoliberalism, it has managed to deposit distinctive features on the governance of that city. A more qualified notion of neoliberalism is therefore required, Boyle et al argue, to represent the broadly neoliberal direction of change in institutional governance as it manifests itself in specific cities in highly contingent forms.

What exactly neoliberal 'purity' means here is unclear. Such language is redolent of a fictitious, monolithic and even development that can be found nowhere. It is useful to recall the often forgotten distinction between *capital* and *capitalism* made by Marx. He called his famous book *Capital* and not *Capitalism* precisely because capital is the dominating metabolic power of society, which only takes a fully capitalist form under certain historical conditions (Mészáros, 1995). Capital is not a material entity, a thing, but a relation of compulsion, an antagonistic social relation of control over humanity's productive capacity. Just as the human anatomy is the key to that of the ape, capital subsumes all earlier forms of socio-economic development in a distorted and caricatured form. As a dynamic, contradictory totality capital is also interdependent with a range of specifically capitalist socio-spatial formations, for instance from broadly neoliberal variants of Anglo-American capitalism to 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics', and many gradations and variations in between. Cities like Glasgow inherit and mediate the social metabolism of capital as a relation of compulsion in a specifically capitalist spatial mix. The chemically 'pure' form that Marx analyses in *Capital* imposes

exclusively economic control over the process of surplus extraction. Later 'mixed economies' (sic) or 'state capitalisms' supplement this through the political regulation of surplus labour. 'Neoliberal urbanism' subsumes earlier economic and political variants of capitalism, one as a blunt ideological instrument and the other to substitute for the market failure of local capitals. It also mobilises cultural regulation as a relation of compulsion in the service of local surplus extraction, in often quite explicit ways in contemporary Glasgow (see Gray, 2008).

Against the variegated moments of the capital relation as a totality, it is therefore unfortunate that Boyle et al prefer to follow Peck and Tickell's view of neoliberalism as a 'hybrid' or 'mutant' social formation. In one sense this is unexceptional if all that is involved is an anodyne point about uneven and untidy socio-spatial relations. But neoliberalism is made from far more combustible material than that. It is saturated with class content. Boyle et al tend to limit their idea of hybridity to a largely internalist account of the city, neglecting the way that neoliberal governance depends on a wider inter-urban competition for capital investment, infrastructural advantages, and manipulation of a local supply of high value, low cost labour power. In the case of Glasgow, both the central British state and the devolved Scottish state have played strategic roles to stimulate inter-urban rivalries through the political construction of markets. Within this larger conception post-industrial cities like Glasgow are compelled to become accomplices in their own functional subordination to capital.

In so doing Boyle et al conflate a prescriptive neoliberal ideology with 'actually existing' spatialised structures of accumulation. This leads them into a style of argument that rests on a form of double-declaring, alternating between statements that tend to cancel each other out in support of their idea of a 'hybrid' socio-spatial formation. On the one hand, neoliberalism is poised precariously - 'roll-out neoliberalism will continue to struggle to secure a regulatory framework capable of stabilizing local accumulation indefinitely' (p. 324). On the other hand, neoliberalism appears resolute - 'In spite of dire predictions and apocalyptic forecasts, neoliberalism has shown itself to be a

tenacious animal' (p. 322). Where and by whom such catastrophic diagnoses have been made we are not told. In any case, perhaps such claims might bear some predictive power given the magnitude of the ongoing systemic crisis of accumulation that has unfolded since autumn 2007.

Inflated predictions about sustainable urban prosperity in Glasgow through retail and services now have to reckon with deepening recession and industrial contraction. Neoliberal urbanism was premised on an idealised model of the market coupled with a consumption-led strategy, one that depended on unsustainable levels of corporate and personal indebtedness (Law and Mooney, 2009). Local planners, politicians, policy makers and commentators now find themselves in the ideological bind of a generation-long commitment to a failed paradigm that they expected would shape place-specific urban policy in perpetuity. With Boyle et al we share an ambition to examine concretely actually-existing socio-spatial formations, as capital undergoes periodic restructuring. For all the talk of urban sustainability and stability neoliberalism seems to be in the process of transmogrifying into something else as we write. More than a vague conceptual appeal to hybridity seems necessary for us to capture the totality of the emerging spatial dynamic.

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