

EVENT REPORT

First Workshop of the RSA RN Varieties of Neoliberalism and Alternative
Regional and Urban Strategies
(Weds 16th June 2010)

Presenters

Kean Birch (University of Strathclyde) kean.birch@strath.ac.uk
Mike Danson (University of the West of Scotland) Michael.Danson@uws.ac.uk
Anita Dixit (Jawaharlal Nehru University) anidixit@gmail.com
Crispian Fuller (Aston University) C.FULLER@aston.ac.uk
Andy Pike (University of Newcastle) Andy.Pike@newcastle.ac.uk
Jörg Plöger (ILS – Forschung) joerg.ploeger@ils-forschung.de
Matti Siemiatycki (University of Toronto) siemiatycki@geog.utoronto.ca
Katherine Trebeck (Oxfam Scotland) KTrebeck@Oxfam.org.uk
Alberto Violante (La Sapienza University) albertoviol@gmail.com

Attendees

Christine Cooper (University of Strathclyde) c.cooper@strath.ac.uk
Neil Davidson (University of Strathclyde) neil.davidson@strath.ac.uk
Stella Lowder (University of Glasgow) Stella.Lowder@ges.gla.ac.uk
Danny MacKinnon (University of Glasgow) Danny.MacKinnon@ges.gla.ac.uk
Anna McLauchlan (University of Strathclyde) anna.mclauchlan@strath.ac.uk
Vlad Mykhnenko (University of Nottingham) vlad.mykhnenko@nottingham.ac.uk
James Sidaway (University of Amsterdam) j.d.sidaway@uva.nl

Preamble

The Research Network focuses on the differential impacts that neoliberalisation - as a process - has had on regional and urban development over the last three decades (and more) around the world. In particular, industrial restructuring, continuing deindustrialisation and the resulting structural unemployment have had deleterious social, economic and political impacts that have not necessarily been ameliorated by the expansion of regional and urban policy-making. The continuing relevance and impact of national systems of capitalism and global actors is evident, despite arguments to the contrary, which suggests that there is a need to rethink theories, methods and approaches in order to understand the current socio-economic crisis in a regional and urban context.

In light of these issues, the first workshop included theoretically-informed and empirically-grounded papers from the latest international research on the changing imperatives, implications and initiatives that are driving regional and urban socio-economic performance. The workshop included papers that (a) developed the theoretical insights from the literature on neoliberalism and neoliberalisation by exploring specific regional and urban examples of these processes; (b) considered how different regional and urban strategies have been

affected by neoliberal imperatives; and (c) looked at whether (and how) different social actors have resisted (or not) these imperatives.

Presentations

The workshop started with a paper by Matti Siemiatycki and Kean Birch looking at marketization as a particular neoliberal process, one which has not received as much attention as other processes like privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation. In their paper they showed the diversity and variety of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in transport infrastructure development around the world. By drawing on a database of PPPs, they showed how different geopolitical regions, countries and sub-national regions have very different levels of marketisation. They also explored some the reasons for this variety looking at the specific political-economic geographies of PPPs.

The second presentation in the workshop was by Katherine Trebeck of Oxfam Scotland. She talked about the issues facing poorer communities in Scotland, especially in terms of their exclusion from a neoliberal, consumer-based society. In her discussion she highlighted the problem of consumption-based aspirations, highlighting the stigma attached to non- or under-consumption in neoliberal economies.

The second session, after the morning coffee break, had two papers focused on city competitiveness. The first, by Alberto Violante, focused on city competitiveness and Florida's creative city thesis. It critiqued the notion that all cities can be conceived as similar (e.g. similar labour markets). The paper specifically focused on Rome as a model for city competitiveness to illustrate this critical take on Florida's theory. The model of development in Rome has been characterised, over the last decade, by investment in 'cultural' events as a strategy to attract tourists. As such the municipality has also become indebted as a consequence of its investment in a public transport system designed to meet tourist flows. In conclusion, Violante illustrates the double bind that urban policy-makers are in because they are unable to use public money to restructure their economies yet they are expected to compete in the world economy.

The second paper, by Jörg Plöger, also looked at city competitiveness through a case study of the Ruhr. Again Plöger argued, like Violante, that urban policy-makers have latched onto Florida's ideas about creative cities and the creative class. As a consequence, policy-makers have sought to encourage and support particular infrastructural and soft assets as a mechanism to attract skilled, international workers. The paper focused on the expansion of international schools and educational establishments as one such asset. The rationale behind these schools is that need to attract international investment and labour necessitate the provision of attractive 'soft assets' for workers in these international businesses.

The third session, after lunch, concerned particular places: Scotland, West Midlands and Gujarat (India). The first paper in this session, by Mike Danson and Geoff Whittam, explored the relationship between Scottish public sector service delivery and volunteering in light of the current recession. The policy drive behind volunteering is based on the notion that social entrepreneurship will provide the means to alleviate some of the worst impacts of the financial crisis through the provision of work experience, social capital etc. However, they

argued that volunteering could have a negative impact on public services through contracting out the third sector where employment conditions and wages are worse (e.g. less secure, lower paid). They also showed that volunteering is itself uneven, in that more people in highest (than lowest) socio-economic groups volunteer. They are specific barriers that need to be overcome in order to change this.

The second paper after lunch was by Crispian Fuller and concerned regional policy-making and restructuring in the West Midlands. He argued that the current financial mess represents a crisis in and not of neoliberalism. The constantly changing discourse in urban/regional development and regeneration has not changed, especially the emphasis on entrepreneurship providing both economic development and social cohesion. Furthermore, neoliberalism has not only led to a downward shift in responsibility towards regional policy-makers, it has also increasingly pushed further down to 'sub-regional' actors such as frontline staff in public services.

The final paper in this session was by Anita Dixit who discussed the relationship between neoliberal growth regimes and poverty with reference to Gujarat in India. She showed that Gujarat was an early liberalising state in India, leading to growth in industrial and services employment as well as income; however, at the same time there has been a corresponding rise in malnutrition. This stands in contrast to the rest of India. Dixit argued that this is a direct result of neoliberal policies which have forced the people in Gujarat to spend more of their income on non-food services and goods as a consequence of privatisation.

The final paper of the day was by Andy Pike. He focused on the consequences of financialisation for regional economies raising the point that neoliberalism is sometimes a fuzzy concept. In his paper, Pike outlined the history of Northern Rock from building society to collapse. He highlighted how it was (and still is) embedded in the North-east, meaning that its collapse threatens to impact significantly on regional employment and growth. He concluded by arguing that the growth offered by financial services has proved fragile for the North-east, reproducing the uneven development of post-industrial restructuring. The UK economy, thus, still needs rebalancing.

Postscript

All the presentations generated wide ranging discussions amongst the workshop participants, which continued afterwards in the pub and at dinner. Overall, the workshop provided a good venue to bring together a range of different views on neoliberalism in a regional and urban context. One issue that we would like to highlight is that the level of participation was not as high or as diverse as we would have liked it to be. One possible suggestion to encourage wider participation in such events would be the ability to fund senior academic and non-academic participants from Band A countries. The present funding limitations inhibit the level of participation, something which contradicts the central objective of such events.



**First RSA Research Network
Workshop**
Varieties of Neoliberalism and
Alternative Regional and Urban
Strategies



Wednesday 16th June 2010

WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

10.45am	Coffee
11am	Matti Siemiatycki (Toronto University) & Kean Birch (Strathclyde University) Varieties of Neoliberalisation: Marketisation and Public-private Partnerships in Transport Infrastructure Katherine Trebeck (Oxfam Scotland) Whose Economy?
12pm	Break
12.15pm	Alberto Violante (La Sapienza University) Competition Behind Creativity: A Southern European Perspective Jörg Plöger (Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development, Dortmund) Another Item on the "Curriculum" of Urban Competitiveness? International Schools and Educational Degrees
1.15pm	Lunch
2pm	Mike Danson (UWS) & Geoff Whittam (UWS) The VCS and Public Service Delivery: Lessons from Scotland Crispian Fuller (Aston University) Neoliberalisation, Crisis and Regulatory Restructuring in Age of Change: The Case of the West Midlands Anita Dixit (Jawaharlal Nehru University) Market-led Growth and Well-Being – Gujarat 1980 to 2005
3.30pm	Break
3.45pm	Andy Pike et al (Newcastle University) Placing the Run on Northern Rock
4.30	Close

Location: Room 311, Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow
<http://www.ges.gla.ac.uk:443/locationmaps>

Participation: If you would like to attend and haven't already contacted the organisers then please do so as soon as possible:

Kean Birch (kean.birch@strath.ac.uk)
Vlad Mykhnenko (vlad.mykhnenko@nottingham.ac.uk)
Danny MacKinnon (Danny.MacKinnon@ges.gla.ac.uk)

The Regional Studies Association is a registered charity (No. 1084165) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (No. 4116228).