



The urban in fragile, uncertain, neoliberal times: towards new geographies of social justice?

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Canadian cities are at a crossroads. The neoliberalization of governance at multiple scales, inadequate re-investment in urban infrastructure, increasing reliance on continental and international trade, and the restructuring of the space economy have combined to weaken Canada's cities just as the global economic system is undergoing transformation. Canadian urban geographic scholarship has much to offer under current conditions, and is already making significant contributions in key areas. In particular, research on what might be called the contours and impacts of urban restructuring and the neoliberal city, immigration and cities of difference, and urban environmental justice show much promise and are likely to define the core of Canadian urban geography into the future.

Key words: cities, urban geography, Canada, economic restructuring, neoliberalism, social justice

L'urbain à une époque fragile, incertaine et néolibérale: vers de nouvelles géographies de la justice sociale?

Les villes canadiennes sont à la croisée des chemins. Alors que l'économie mondiale traverse une période de transformation, la situation des villes au Canada se précarise avec les effets de la restructuration néolibérale de la gouvernance à multiples niveaux, l'insuffisance du réinvestissement dans les infrastructures urbaines, la dépendance accrue des échanges commerciaux internationaux, ainsi que la restructuration de l'économie de l'espace. Dans les conditions actuelles, la recherche canadienne en géographie urbaine a beaucoup à offrir et continue de fournir un apport significatif dans les domaines d'importance majeure. Les principaux thèmes de recherche abordés sont entre autres les contours et les effets de la restructuration urbaine et la ville néolibérale, les villes socialement hétérogènes et l'immigration, et la justice environnementale urbaine. Ils montrent un énorme potentiel et sont susceptibles de définir les éléments fondamentaux de la géographie urbaine canadienne pour les années à venir.

Mots clés: villes, géographie urbaine, Canada, restructuration économique, néolibéralisme, justice sociale

Cities in Canada are at a crossroads. Changes occurring over the last thirty years or so, including but not limited to the economic restructuring of urban industrial bases in the context of continentalization and globalization, the continued dispersal of residences and jobs, declining political representation on behalf of the central cities and shifts in immigration policy and settlement patterns, have together produced an increasingly uneven, socially inequitable, politically disjointed and environmentally unsustainable urban legacy (see Yalnizyan 1998, 2007; Walks 2001, 2004, 2006; Townshend and Walker 2002; Ross *et al.* 2004; FCM 2005; Wilson and Anielski 2005).

Layered on top of, and partly driving, this unequal urban legacy, have been new uneven geographies of regional development, growth and decline, local fiscal crises, and now major economic restructuring, and simultaneously the rise of neoliberal public policies at various scales. Neoliberal times involve, among other things, a reliance on market solutions to public policy problems, privileging the actions of the wealthy and the 'talented', the privatization of state assets and functions, and an attack on welfare state provisions. At its heart, neoliberalism is a political project with utopian overtones that seeks to restructure welfare states and reinstate class power (see Harvey 2005, 2007; Hackworth 2007; Peck 2008). Global economic restructuring and crisis is the current manifestation of neoliberal times, brought on through lack of regulatory oversights and the promotion of neoliberal policies that diverted capital in unsustainable and inequitable ways to particular secondary-circuit consumption sectors (see Harvey 2005, 2007; Gotham 2006, forthcoming; Crump *et al.* 2008; Aalbers 2009).

The ascendance of neoliberalism in particular presents a challenge concerning both the exacerbating of social impacts traced to the inherited urban legacy, as well as the search for potential solutions. This is partly because actually existing neoliberalism has faced an uneven set of locally based constraints and has been implemented in a highly uneven and at times haphazard way (see Brenner and Theodore 2002; Johnston and Glasmeier 2007). In Canada, neoliberal policy shifts have been more associated with the *roll-back* of the welfare state and the downloading of responsibility for service delivery and

expenditures, leaving less of a role for potentially innovative *roll-out* regulatory mechanisms and system rationalizations (see Peck and Tickell 2002) that might stimulate new investment in urban infrastructures, services and/or new institutions (Vojnovic 2006; although see Hackworth 2008, for a slightly different perspective concerning the social housing sector). Part of the problem as it relates to Canadian cities involves the 'mismatched rescaling' of resource-allocation capacities and responsibilities (often downloaded) and decision-making processes (often retained by upper levels of government), which produce 'hollow' local governments rendered fundamentally incapable of fulfilling their new responsibilities (Miller 2007, 236; see also Donald 2005). One result is the systemic delaying of expenditures on public infrastructure and deferred maintenance by both upper and local levels of government, which in Canada has produced a combined municipal infrastructure deficit estimated at \$123 billion in 2008, growing by \$2 billion each year (FCM 2008).¹

As the most recent articulation of the capitalist mode of production, neoliberalism (and globalism) are associated with particular and still only partly hegemonic 'governmentalities' which work to prescribe and limit the realm of potential policy alternatives, but against which new forms of resistance and counter-hegemonic ideas have emerged, or have the potential to emerge (e.g., see Isin 2000; Keil 2002; Larner and Craig 2005). As economic crisis stimulates a renewed restructuring of production, finance, consumption and poverty, while provoking new policy debates and searches for solutions, it is likely that myriad changes to come will play themselves out most markedly in the landscape of Canada's cities.

Urban geographic scholarship has a particularly important role to play here, in delineating (quantitatively and qualitatively) the urban impacts and effects of uneven development, renewed restructuring, and the uneven imposition and emergence of forms of neoliberalism, but also in illuminating important connections that

¹ That such estimates were produced at the top of the economic cycle when upper levels of government were not facing budgetary crises serves to further reinforce the seriousness of the infrastructure challenges faced by Canadian cities and in turn highlights the importance of the present conjuncture.



can inform the search for policy solutions and political strategies. This is not to say that urban geography is or should be *only* concerned with tracing the effects and impacts of neoliberalism and economic restructuring. Yet their legacies cannot help but lurk in the background, if not loom large overhead, of current and future urban research.

This article reflects on the state of current urban geographic scholarship, particularly as it applies to the Canadian scene, and speculates on future directions and possibilities for the sub-discipline given current trends and strengths. I give particular focus to three constellations of Canadian urban geography where important and upcoming research is being conducted and where the most pressing future questions and policy problems are most likely to be addressed.²

A New Urban Question?

Before interrogating the substance of current urban geography scholarship, it is first important to consider how one might define the 'urban'. I, for one, find Henri Lefebvre's 38-year old contention that 'society has been completely urbanized' (1970, 1) enlightening on a number of levels. Lefebvre suggested that what others term a post-industrial society is necessarily an *urban* society, since once industrialization, and all this entails, has permeated every facet of economic and social organization, including those in rural areas such that 'agricultural production has lost all its autonomy', social relations everywhere come to reflect the emergent 'tendencies, orientations, and virtualities' of urban life (ibid. 2-3). Rural villages and villagers then become 'an integral part of industrial production and consumption'. That is, they become subsumed into an urban mode of production, which according to Lefebvre is the new form that global capitalism takes once the logics of managing industrialization 'burst apart', 'the urban problematic

² While I privilege recent research of junior faculty in this commentary, this should not be taken as a critique or dismissal of past Canadian geographic scholarship, for which I have enormous respect. The focus on more recent topics and trends is meant to both follow on, as well as trace new directions beyond, the insightful summaries of Bourne (2005) and others.

becomes predominant' and 'the search for solutions and modalities unique to urban society are foremost' (ibid., 5; see also Goonewardena and Kipfer 2008).

In addition to the profound implications this has for the (re)organization of social life, Lefebvre's still provocative hypothesis raises questions about what might constitute the object of analysis in the study of *urban* geography. Such questions are especially pertinent in countries like Canada, where more than four of every five people (80.2 percent in 2006) live in a place classified as 'urban' by Statistics Canada. Furthermore, processes and policies taking place at other scales (e.g., national/federal policy, globalization, immigration) not only have considerable import for understanding the urban, but they are largely the product of, and reflect processes occurring within and between cities. For instance, as others have noted (Ley and Hiebert 2001), in the absence of any national urban or population policy, immigration policy has become the *de facto* driver of uneven population growth and change, and perhaps even more importantly, of urban policy, considering approximately 80 percent of recent immigrants to Canada settle in the six largest metropolitan regions (which only account for 44 percent of all Canadians). Geographies of immigration then, must be seen as fundamentally urban. Likewise, one needs to recognize the urban importance and origins of such diverse issues as the spatialities of social and cultural identities, social capital, labour markets and environmental pollution. Urban geography has thus evolved to be a highly diverse and integrative sub-discipline, one that deserves recognition for its ability to link the social, cultural, economic, political and environmental in the search for truth (or, if you prefer, 'truth').

Urban Scholarship in Fragile Uncertain Political Times

The urban impacts of the emergence and imposition of neoliberalism, the restructuring of capitalism and globalization and policy solutions for promoting social justice, are emerging as key questions informing contemporary urban geographic research. Of course, urban geographers have always been concerned with policy reform

and finding ways to improve quality of life in cities. This might be expected given the thematic (as opposed to methodological or theoretical) organizing focus of the sub-discipline, the scale of its primary objects, and its close connections with city planning. However, both the modes of inquiry and breadth of questions being asked have evolved to become more explicitly and consistently politicized than in earlier periods. This can be traced to the problematic of the current conjuncture. Scholarship in earlier (post-war) periods was generally conducted in the context of a growing and then maturing welfare state, which, although it may have been a historical exception to the usual trajectory of capitalism, produced solid expectations for continued progress shaped by discourses of modernity. While there is a long history of critical urban research of an explicitly political nature, it has traditionally been possible to assume a somewhat apolitical research agenda in the expectation that sound empirical research would eventually beget sound policy regardless of the ideological or partisan stripes of those in positions of power. This approach has clearly dominated 'mainstream' scholarship from even before the quantitative revolution.

In contrast, recent crops of urban geographers cut their academic teeth during a time when the (always imperfect and partial) welfare state, and indeed the image of a whole way of life that they had grown up to assume and take for granted, would appear to have come under attack. Quite apart from, or perhaps in addition to, the ideological and policy orientations of urban researchers, the emergence and imposition of neoliberalism has challenged the *identities* of many current scholars, whose values are tied up with the expectations they internalized during formative years. This is particularly the case when such values and expectations were decidedly apolitical, nonpartisan, and couched in discourses of modernism. Indeed, the neoliberal attack exposes many of these values and expectations as founded upon (hidden, taken for granted) political assumptions, and thus as containing distinct political content. Thus the rise of neoliberalism and globalization, as well as emerging and mounting social, environment and economic problems, have been accompanied by growing awareness of the political importance and content of urban policy and research,

including that which continues the tradition of methodologically rigorous empirical enquiry.

This political dimension is increasingly important to the questions being researched by Canadian urban geographers. Even when such research remains largely within the realm of 'objective' quantitative social science, research agendas and problems are increasingly defined in relation to questions that are at heart political. Such a 'political' turn has produced much new innovative and fruitful urban scholarship, and in turn holds potential for informing policy and shaping new geographies of social justice.³ Below, I provide an incomplete sample of themes and topics, clustered in what I see as three important constellations of Canadian research strength, that highlight important geographic questions related to both the study of the urban and the search for potential solutions.

The contours and impacts of urban restructuring and the neoliberal city

Urban geographers have been, among other things, at the forefront of formulating and flushing out the concept of neoliberalism and its importance for governance (see Brenner and Theodore 2002; Mitchell 2004; Harvey 2005; Hackworth 2007; Leitner *et al.* 2007; Peck 2008). Of course, neoliberalism characterizes merely the latest phase of the capitalist mode of production. While it may produce new urban geographies, forms and inequalities, when layered on top of the legacy of previous phases, neoliberal capitalism can also be seen as prioritizing certain laws and logics of the land market that have always been present, potentially leading to the re-assertion of older, pre-war patterns and inequities. This tension is evident in the contributions of a number of Canadian geographers researching, among other things, the geography of office and real estate development (Charney 2001, 2003, 2005; Buzzelli and

³Note that I am not arguing that quality research must be politicized, concerned only with social theory or spurn quantitative empirical methods. There remains an important role for objective empirical social science. It is increasingly recognized, however, that important questions have inherently political content, and this has proved fruitful in articulating intellectual debates, defining research questions and setting research agendas.



Harris 2003, 2006), and the importance of housing within the shifting terrain of international development programs and discourses (Arku and Harris 2005; Arku 2006).

Work is now being conducted that interrogates the contours and scaling of neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal policy in Canadian cities. Taking up the challenge presented by Neil Brenner's (2004) discussion of the re-scaling of European city regions under neoliberalism and globalization, (Boudreau *et al.* 2007; see also Boudreau 2007; Boudreau *et al.* 2009) are examining the regional unevenness of neoliberalism, its influence on urban policy and the resulting re-scaling of metropolitan governance in Canada (see also Miller 2007). The changing spatiality of popular support for neoliberal policies and platforms in Canada's suburbs and elsewhere continues to be interrogated by this author (Walks 2004, 2007, 2008), while Cowen (2005) has examined the historical roots of a targeted (neo)liberal municipal policy approach in Toronto's suburbs. The links between path-dependence, globalization and the mutations that various neoliberal policies undergo in their innovation and transfer between cities is also the subject of geographic research (e.g., McCann 2008).

One important correlate of the North American articulation of neoliberal urbanism is the rise of the discourse concerning the 'creative city' and theories of the 'creative class' (see Peck 2005; Wilson and Keil 2008). Canadian geographers are making distinct contributions that problematize, deconstruct and/or re-interpret these concepts in the context of the Canadian city, via research on urban branding and the scaling of creative city discourses (Rantisi and Leslie 2006; Rantisi *et al.* 2006), the discursive link between livability and creativity (McCann 2007), the social capital and power implications of processes of gentrification and displacement related to policies promoting the creative class and space (Leslie and Catungal, forthcoming), and the class networks driving labour markets within fields of 'creative' work (Vinodrai 2006). Similarly, important work has examined the place of labour within the space of the restructuring neoliberal city (Tufts 1998, 2004), the location of home workers (Moos and Skaburskis 2007) and the implications of the restructuring of social assistance programs for disabled workers (Wilton and Schuer 2006).

Future research will also be needed on the geographies of undocumented workers in Canadian cities.

The impacts of shifts in public policy on the quality of life and social regulation of low-income households, housing markets and on the restructuring of public institutions, are other key aspects to emerging research. Skaburskis and Mok (2000) have demonstrated that sufficient affordable rental housing is not likely to be attained through the neoliberal policy emphasis of relying on private sector filtering, while the research by DeVerteuil (2003a, 2003b, 2006) documents the rise of new forms of 'poverty management' and new spatialities of poverty and homelessness. The trials and tribulations of the restructuring of the Ontario provincial state during the years Mike Harris was premier are providing important lessons concerning the effects of neoliberalism on public institutions. For instance, important work has begun to examine how roll-back and roll-out phases of neoliberalism are articulated within Ontario's social housing sector (Hackworth and Moriah 2006; Hackworth 2008), as well as the fiscal and spatial rationalization of Ontario's public education sector and its implications for citizenship (Basu 2004, 2007). The use of 'public-private partnerships' (or 'P3s') to stimulate investment in urban infrastructure is another topic requiring and receiving attention (e.g., Siemiatycki 2006). These are areas where further research is necessary and where urban geography can make continued significant contributions.

Another feature of urban neoliberalism has been the promotion of inner-city gentrification (Blomley 2004; Meligrana and Skaburskis 2005; Lees *et al.* 2007). Research has examined how gentrification has been 'municipally managed' in the service of a new middle class and the entrepreneurial city (Slater 2004), and how new public discourses and revisionist histories have been employed to justify the displacement wrought by gentrification (Whitzman and Slater 2006; Catungal *et al.*, 2009). Likewise, the relationship between cosmopolitanism, ethnic retail and gentrification (Hackworth and Rekers 2005; see also Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005), and links to 'smart growth' intensification and waterfront development (Bunce 2004) have been features of urban geographic scholarship.

A related emerging literature deconstructs the discourse of 'social mix' nurtured and promoted by neoliberal urban policy and examines the links between the imposition and experience of social mix in inner-city social housing redevelopments and gentrification (Rose 2004; August 2008). Canadian research is important for providing evidence questioning the link between gentrification and the expectations for producing a benevolent social mix in affected neighbourhoods (Smith 2003; Walks and Maaranen 2008). Against a backdrop of increasing homelessness, poverty and the withdrawal of the federal and most provincial governments from the provision of new social housing (see Walks 2006), some, including this author, have begun to examine potential barriers to gentrification and policies for maintaining inclusive neighbourhoods within the inner city where services for low-income households are more accessible (Ley and Dobson 2008; Walks and August 2008).

With the emergence of the most recent phase of global economic and political restructuring, urban geography will be at the forefront in researching important and in many cases hitherto unforeseen questions. These potentially include the urban impacts of de-globalization and shrinking world trade; renewed state dirigisme and the modification of neoliberal policies into new hybrid forms; challenges to the auto-dependent ways of urban life prevalent in Canadian metropolitan areas; and the suburbanization of poverty and crime, leading to new patterns of socio-spatial polarization.

Cities of difference: immigration, citizenship and urban identities

Globalization, immigration and transnationalism are changing the 'face' of urban society, and this has been particularly true in Canadian cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary and Montréal (and their suburbs, see Ray *et al.* 1997; Ray and Peake 2001). However, the peculiar dynamics of integration, assimilation, social conflict and cultural change are uneven among cities, and among the neighbourhoods that make up urban regions. High rates of immigration, in combination with neoliberal policies and economic logics, challenges established understandings of citizen-

ship, while new urban and social identities are being constructed in cities in Canada and elsewhere, not only in terms of ethnicity but also gender and class.

Canadian geographers are examining such questions. In light of the recent theoretical contributions of Aihwa Ong (2006), Hardt and Negri (2004), and Engin Isin (2002) (expanding upon the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, among others), geographers are illuminating how globalization, urbanization and the neo-liberalization of culture produces new social identities and categories of otherness in the contemporary city. Some of this work involves exploration of the meaning of a 'transnational habitus' (Ley 2004; Kelly and Lusi 2006), as well as the ways urban space mediates how immigrants and ethnic minorities understand, perform and negotiate their identities, social capital and citizenship (Walton-Roberts 2003; Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005; Veronis 2006, 2007; Ghosh 2007). Similarly, Canadian geographers are at the forefront in examining questions of settlement, poverty and citizenship among urban aboriginal communities (Walker 2006a, 2006b; Starchenko and Peters 2008).

Canadian geographic scholarship continues to contribute to an understanding of how local and national political economies, prevalent attitudes and nonacceptance of credentials, as well as urban neighbourhoods and public spaces, influence relative levels of assimilation and exclusion among immigrants (Teixeira 2001, 2007; Bauder 2002, 2003, 2008; Hiebert 2006; Hiebert and Ley 2003; Teixeira *et al.* 2007; see also Wood and Gilbert 2005). Related analyses are investigating the geography of immigrant settlement patterns and widening immigrant inequality, and their implications for the emergence of concentrated poverty and homeless in neighbourhoods and cities (Moore and Pacey 2003; Fiedler *et al.* 2006; Walks and Bourne 2006; Hiebert *et al.* 2007; Newbold and DeLuca 2007; Smith and Ley 2008), as well as immigrants' access to important public services (Asanin and Wilson 2008). Coming out of an immigrant/settler nation with both large inflows of immigrants and a growing urban aboriginal population, Canadian urban geographical scholarship will have much to contribute to these themes in the future.



Difference in the city is, of course, not limited to ethnicity, race or immigration (see Fincher and Jacobs 1998). Important recent work has examined the relationship between urban space (including emergent urban forms such as those produced through condominium development), gender identity and the challenges of promoting women's safety and belonging in the contemporary neoliberal city (Bain 2003; Kern 2007; Whitzman 2007), as well as the problems that traditional service provision models pose for homeless women in Canada (Whitzman 2006). Geographers are providing spatial perspectives on the history of various urban political movements, including the identity politics of gays and lesbians (Nash 2005) and constructions of queer identities in the context of contemporary legal developments (Bain and Nash 2007), as well as continuing to explore the history of ethnic and cultural politics in Canadian cities (e.g., Jenkins 2007).

The study of urban space as a mediating factor in the construction of citizenship and identity takes on renewed urgency as cities of difference are overlain by the effects of neoliberal urban policies and the privatization of space, as well as economic dislocations and the potential rise of nationalisms, possibly producing new geographies of inequality, separation, control and fear in Canadian cities. This portends, among other things, a continued focus on gated communities (Grant *et al.* 2004; Grant 2007; Grant and Rosen 2009; Walks 2009), as well as increased attention on urban and national security (Cowen and Bunce 2006).

Urban environmental justice

Continued population growth, coupled with rising socio-economic inequality and poverty, presents particular challenges related to negative externalities, land-use conflict and the sustainability of metropolitan economies and ecologies. This is especially so considering the emergence over the last 20 years of strong neighbourhood opposition movements controlled by wealthier urban residents, who are then able to externalize most of the costs associated with 'problem' land uses onto poor and marginalized neighbourhoods. With any reduction in land-use regulation and the liberation of spatial investment possibil-

ities on behalf of developers and/or potentially the state, there is the possibility that metropolitan regions will be beset by increased urban environmental conflict. As well, neoliberalism in places like Ontario has been associated with the reduction in funding and regulatory capacity on behalf of public health officials and inspectors (Prudham 2004). It is important, therefore, to understand the relationships between place and environmental externalities, and the dynamics associated with struggles over environmental equity and urban sustainability.

While still somewhat of a fledgling topic within urban geography, environmental justice is a research area where Canadian scholars are already making significant contributions. Canadian research has been fruitful for exploring the racial and socio-economic correlates of air pollution (Buzzelli *et al.* 2003; Buzzelli and Jerret 2004; Keller-Olaman *et al.* 2005; Buzzelli 2007, 2008), as well as the dynamics of collective action concerning various associated environmental health risks (Wakefield *et al.* 2006, 2007). Likewise, research has begun to examine the links between social disadvantage and neighbourhood exposure to natural hazards (e.g., Andrey and Jones 2008). Of course, environmental equity also concerns the distribution of those public resources that embed positive externalities. For example, recent studies have examined unevenness in access to grocery stores, neighbourhood parks, and recreation services (Gilliland *et al.* 2006; Larsen and Gilliland 2008), and have modelled levels of access to various amenities among low-income households and social housing residents (Apparicio and Seguin 2006; Vandersmissen *et al.* 2009).

A related literature is concerned with fostering urban environmental sustainability. The food economy, local food movements and community gardens feature as important recent Canadian case studies within this strand (Baker 2004; Blay-Palmer and Donald 2006). While often touted as a force for environmental equity and local democracy-building (see Levkoe 2006), the reliance on local food networks and/or more expensive organic practices raises issues related to social equity and inclusion, and is vulnerable to romanticism and political cooptation (Donald and Blay-Palmer 2006; Eaton 2008). Increasing uncertainty regarding global fuel, shipping and other transportation costs, not to mention

concern over genetic modification, trade disruption and unevenness in the regulatory standards observed at source locations (both inside and outside Canada), will put a premium on research related to these issues in the future. As the potential for urban environmental conflicts and dislocations of food distribution networks rise, Canadian geographers have an opportunity to contribute to both theories and policy solutions that seek to ameliorate negative conditions for future urban dwellers, by expanding the range and scope of research on urban environmental justice, equity and sustainability.

Conclusion

Canadian cities are facing an increasingly uncertain and uneven future. To find solutions to the emerging problems rooted both in the urban legacy of the last 50 years and the concomitant impacts and logics of globalization, neoliberalism and economic restructuring, will require a sustained academic effort as well as significant political will on behalf of policy-makers and politicians. Canadian geographic scholarship is poised to contribute to this effort, particularly through an analytical focus on the social and political contours of neoliberalism and urban economic restructuring, social and cultural difference within cities and the implications for identity construction and citizenship, and urban environmental justice and equity. What ties each of these themes together is a concern for the 'right to the city' and social justice. There are many possibilities for progressive social change, and urban geographic research will be important to understanding these potentialities. Future research efforts will require the adoption of a host of analytical frameworks, scales of analysis and different methods of inquiry, whose diversity will continue to be a major strength of the sub-discipline. In turn, geographic scholarship has the opportunity to foster research that informs and delineates potentially new geographies of urban social justice, and this will be, and should be, the key goal and question that drives the next generation of urban geographers.

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