

'Don't Waste a Crisis': Opening up the City Yet Again for Neoliberal Experimentation

STIJN OOSTERLYNCK and SARA GONZÁLEZ

Abstract

This essay calls for a systematic investigation of the financial-economic crisis as a source of new urban governance rationalities across Europe. We propose combining an understanding of neoliberalization as a variegated social phenomenon with a cultural political economy approach sensitive to the discursive dimension of variegation and the evolutionary mechanisms through which discursive variation is translated into geo-institutional differentiation. We illustrate how this theoretical framework may help to analyse the impact of the crisis on urban governmental rationalities. Rather than offering a complete cultural political economy account of the responses of European cities to the financial-economic crisis, we analyse how the crisis and the responses to it have been represented in discourses on urban policies and development by focusing on two discursive sites that are of strategic importance, namely OECD LEED and URBACT. Our preliminary findings suggest a re-assemblage of existing discourses rather than the emergence of a new post-neoliberal urban government rationality.

Cities in crisis

Cities have been at the heart of the global financial crisis. It has been pointed out, however, that 'more needs to be done to understand the specific role played by the production of urban space in bringing on and lessening the effects of the crisis' (Keil, 2010: 941). The critical academic literature has so far addressed the urban dimension of the crisis from three different angles: (1) the urban roots of the crisis; (2) the crisis as an opportunity for progressive post-neoliberal urban transformations; and (3) the crisis as another wave of the constant restructuring of urban neoliberalization.

Already in early analyses of the global financial crisis, authors have pointed to the urban nature of the crisis, linking it to the geographically uneven financialization of the urbanization process (Rutland, 2010). Various accounts have explained how the subprime mortgage crisis was in fact symptomatic of a neoliberal urban accumulation system, often based on deregulation of financial and land markets and planning systems, financialization and speculative property development, and state incentives encouraging homeownership and overbuilding (see e.g. García, 2010; Rolnik, 2013, this issue).

Other authors have pointed out that the crisis is an opportunity to challenge the excesses of the prevalent urban growth model. Now that the limits of some of the current

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processes (such as financialization) have been exposed, suggests Mayer (Soureli and Youn, 2009), post-neoliberal alternatives advocating more just, democratic, ecological city-regions ought to be taken more seriously. Because its effects were transmitted from the financial sector to the state in the form of fiscal austerity, more sceptical accounts of the crisis as just another phase in the ongoing neoliberal restructuring of cities have become more prevalent (Peck *et al.*, 2010). Brenner, for example, does not see ‘the present geoeconomic crisis as interrupting any of the following basic trends within post-1970s hyperpolarized urbanization’ (Soureli and Youn, 2009: 44).

In sum, the literature on the financial-economic crisis and cities has to date mainly focused on the urban roots of the crisis in the financialized mode of urban development, the potential for post-neoliberal urban development models and the crisis as enabling, ongoing, neoliberal urban restructuring. However, there has been little systematic empirical analysis of the crisis as a ‘laboratory’ for urban governance models. Bearing in mind how the 1970s economic crisis opened up the city as a laboratory for neoliberal experiments (Harvey, 2005), it is now crucial to develop a sustained critical analysis of the financial-economic crisis and the urban question. As we start to see a variety of urban responses unfold across the world, we must ask whether they serve to reinforce ongoing neoliberal urban restructuring or effectively produce new, post-neoliberal, urban governance rationalities. As a starting point, we propose combining the ‘variegated neoliberalization’ approach with a cultural political economy focus on the discursive dimension of the ongoing production of variegation.

Analysing the changing contours of variegated urban neoliberalization

Geographers have long argued that neoliberalism is not a monolithic phenomenon but differs across space. Brenner, Peck and Theodore have recently proposed the concept of ‘variegated neoliberalization’ to capture the ‘systemically produced geoinstitutional differentiation’ under neoliberalism, and stress that the malleability and inherent unevenness of neoliberalism can actually be its strength (Brenner *et al.*, 2010a: 26). Analytically, they argue, we must combine the study of ‘local regulatory experimentation’ with an investigation of ‘institutionalized rule regimes’ (*ibid.*: 35). From this it follows that, in order to analyse the extent to which the global financial crisis is compromising the hegemony of neoliberalism, we should focus not just on the myriad local and variegated responses that might pop up but also on whether the global rule regime is being challenged. For the moment, Peck *et al.* (2010) argue, although we might see disarticulated counter-neoliberalization strategies emerging, the global rule regime is not faltering. They suggest that neoliberalism may have lost its hegemonic appeal and entered a ‘living dead’ phase (‘zombie neoliberalism’), but that it is sustained by macro-economic and macro-institutional conditions such as global over-accumulation, public austerity and indebtedness, and beggar-thy-neighbour governance rationalities.

Brenner *et al.*’s (2010a) account of neoliberalization is a useful framework for the analysis of the multiscalar neoliberalization process. Still, it does not tell us enough about how this geographical institutional variation is systematically produced. Their almost ‘tectonic’ metaphor of waves of regulatory experimentation colliding against inherited politico-institutional arrangements is somewhat rigid, and it has the danger of being translated empirically into a scenario where global forces are imposed into a variety of resisting local situations. A key question is how the inherent geo-institutional variation typical of post-Fordist capitalist political economies is produced, and what explains which forms of variation are institutionalized and inherited while others perish and disappear.

In this essay, we argue that the current crisis offers urban studies scholars a real-time opportunity to study how the variegated contours of urban neoliberalization change over

time. Our point is that to analyse this 'moving map' in detail we need to pull the variegated neoliberalization approach closer to cultural political economy (henceforth CPE) and its concern with discourse, particularly in times of crisis. CPE, at least in its Lancaster variety (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008), shares with the variegated neoliberalization approach the concept of variation as an inherent characteristic of any viable political economy, but explicitly integrates discourse as a constitutive dimension of the variegation of political economies. It borrows from evolutionary approaches to analyse the dynamics of variegation, particularly the interplay between material and discursive dimensions. By conceptualizing mechanisms of change and evolution in political economies, CPE 'dynamizes' the concept of variegation.

CPE's concern with the discursive dimension of geo-institutional variegation under capitalism is grounded in the cultural turn and its discursive account of power (Jessop and Sum, 2001). Actors, their interests and identities are not seen as objectively given and merely reflecting positions in the material structures of capitalist political economies, but as constituted through selective representations or construals of reality. In line with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003), these construals¹ are seen as power-laden. CPE aims to do more than just add 'culture' to political economy and proposes to analyse the interface between material and discursive processes in evolutionary terms (Jessop and Sum, 2010: 95). This implies analysing how, out of an endless variety of discursive construals and associated practices, some are selected and retained in more stable identities, formal and informal institutions and the underlying material structures of society (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008). For CPE, then, variation is a structural feature of political economies. Crucially, this variety is not arbitrary but structured through discursive and material factors and their selectivities. Drawing links with the variegated neoliberalization approach, this CPE understanding of variation, through its concern with the co-evolution of material and discursive processes, allows for an in-depth and dynamic analysis of the production of variation and its structuration.

Jessop and Sum (2010) propose seeing crises as 'real-time laboratories' to study variation and its structuration under capitalism (see also Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008). Crises are moments at which hegemonic understandings of the operation of political economies are called into question. This tends to repoliticize identities, institutions and societal structures, and hence opens up space for a proliferation of discourses attempting to interpret the causes of and solutions to the crisis. Indeed, Jessop and Sum argue that it is precisely during the phase of variation that discursive factors command more influence, whereas the weight of material factors increases when certain crisis discourses are selected and retained, while others are discarded. It is in these latter phases that the geographical, historical and institutional context matters and variation might become variegation. The present crisis conjuncture presents an ideal 'real-time' opportunity to test the CPE-cum-variegated neoliberalization approach, and analyse whether and how hegemonic discourses on urban development are questioned and alternative discourses emerge and/or existing discourses are reassembled as part of ongoing attempts of imagining and remaking cities as strategic sites of capitalist accumulation and regulation. As it is still premature to actually find explicit evidence of variegation (Brenner *et al.*, 2010b) we focus on the earlier, supposedly more tentative, phase of discursive variation. We will do so by focusing on two important discursive sites, i.e. the concrete sites where discourses are produced and disseminated (Dixon and Hapke, 2003), namely OECD LEED and URBACT, which have been most active in producing and disseminating knowledge of the crisis and its impact on various cities at the European scale.

1 Jessop (2009) refers to the distinction between construal and social construction made by Sayer. Construals are meaning-making devices, reducing complexity and making sense of the world; but among all their possible variations only some 'construals' become part of the process of 'social construction'.

Diverse representations of the crisis, its urban impact and responses across Europe: a view from OECD and URBACT

Since this essay is concerned with the (structured diversity of) discursive representations of the crisis, its impact on cities and their responses to it across Europe rather than in one particular city or national state, our analysis focuses on two crucial international organizations that have recently produced some research and reflection on the impact of the global financial-economic crisis on cities, namely OECD and the European Union. In both the OECD and the European Union, institutional spaces have been opened up for the production and dissemination of discourses on the crisis and its urban impact and responses, more specifically in the OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) programme and the EU-funded URBACT network. These are key sites for the creation and distribution of hegemonic policy discourses on urban development and policies in an increasingly fluid landscape of policy mobility (McCann, 2008), and act as amplifiers of the voice of key 'policy transfer activists' (Radaelli, 2000). They are therefore strategic discursive sites to monitor changes at various levels as suggested by Brenner *et al.* (2010b): the macro 'rule regime', forms of local experimentation and the policy transfer sphere. The methodological focus is on the mundane practices of policy document writing, surveys and policymakers' meetings, which have been revealed as key in understanding neoliberal meaning-making (González, 2011).

The OECD LEED programme was founded in the 1980s to champion local economic development, in particular labour market policies. It works at different levels with a directing committee consisting of the OECD countries' labour- and economy-related ministries, a 'partners' club' integrated through a network of subnational governments and various practitioner forums. In 2009, the LEED programme started to reflect on the role of the local level in responding to the global financial-economic crisis. Previously, the crisis had been conceptualized as a 'global' phenomenon initiated by the American subprime mortgage crisis. In March 2009 Barcelona was the venue for the first meeting of the OECD Local Leadership and Economic Recovery Network, a 'high level working group of economic development practitioners aiming at raising awareness on the role of cities in the current situation and on their role in building part of the new economic system' (OECD, n.d.). Here the 'Barcelona principles' for recovery were agreed (see below). In parallel, a survey report was compiled which sought to learn from local economic development measures in previous economic crises (OECD, 2009a); more significantly a review of the effects of and measures arising from the recent crisis was carried out between April and June 2009, focusing on 41 cities from OECD countries (Clark, 2009).

Around the same time as OECD LEED, URBACT started its 'Recession Watch' because, according to its monitoring committee, 'the economic crisis has dramatically altered the context in which they [URBACT members] are operating' (Soto, 2010: 1). URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme that aims to promote sustainable urban development by funding thematic partnership networks. In May 2009, URBACT organized an open 'brain-storming laboratory', which brought together more than 100 representatives from cities and networks such as the OECD LEED programme, to launch a study on the effects of and responses to the crisis, drawing upon the experiences of its members. This study aimed to 'use "the creative tension" generated by the crisis . . . to speed up exchange and learning in an interactive and ongoing way among urban practitioners and policy makers' (Guidoum *et al.*, 2010: 5) and identify common themes. It included a scoping survey and a series of in-depth case studies of cities² (carried out in the last quarter of 2009 and first half of 2010) asking about the nature of the crisis they faced and the policies they were developing in response (URBACT,

2 The cities in question were Rotterdam, Tallinn, Malmö, Newcastle, Dublin, Gijón, Jyväskylä, Turin and Veria.

2010).³ The aim was to show how cities were taking a leading role in addressing the crisis and actively rethinking their future development.

It is worth noting the similarity in the approaches taken by OECD and URBACT. In both discursive sites, the roots of the crisis, urban or otherwise, are not the object of debate. The Clark (2009) report for the OECD identifies the crisis as a phenomenon at the 'global' scale, with the most successful local economic leaders as those responding to it. An important theme running through the document is that the crisis should be seen as an opportunity: 'don't waste the crisis' is the first of the adopted 'Barcelona principles'. The OECD, then, clearly sees the crisis as a moment for urban governance innovation and reinvigoration of local economic leadership, rather than for questioning particular local economic development models. The crisis is represented as deep but cyclical (OECD, 2009a). There is some early evidence that these 'principles' have been used by British local and regional authorities to shape and review their own 'recovery plans' (Bailey and Berkeley, 2010; Mountford, 2010).

In URBACT documents, the crisis is equally taken as a given and 'naturalized' as a source of creativity and innovation in urban development and governance. Guidoum *et al.* (2010: 13) point out that most case study cities have undergone worse crises in the past and that 'the lessons learned by cities during these past crises form an important part of their intellectual capital'. Similarly, the OECD highlights the historic importance of local economic development which was born out of the 1980s crisis and which continues to be renewed in times of crisis. Instead of questioning the roots of the crisis in particular local development models, both OECD and URBACT documents reaffirm the pre-crisis discursive construct of the city as a prime site for the accumulation and regulation of capital in an internationally competitive environment and a laboratory for local regulatory experiments. In order to do so, both suggest a host of urban policy measures and strategies that may help cities in addressing the crisis. Amongst the short-term responses, 'firefighting measures' such as job placements for young people or tax reductions for small businesses have been popular, but the OECD is keener to highlight longer-term strategies aimed at 're-orientating their economies to embrace the likely post-recession global economy' (Clark, 2009: 53). Examples include focusing on 'international positioning, sustainability, openness, branding, leadership, and the arts' (*ibid.*: 75). The URBACT case studies showcase the wide variety of local policy responses to the crisis, ranging from tapping into national recovery packages (e.g. Gijón) and reinforcing local development strategies pioneered in previous crises (e.g. Jyväskylä's ICT-sector-oriented post-recession development strategy) to preventive labour market programmes for young people (e.g. Rotterdam's Youth Action Plan) and strategic public-private partnerships (e.g. innovation poles in Turin).

However diverse the discursive variation of urban responses might appear, little new material is in fact being presented. The emerging response is to keep the investments going, albeit often through Keynesian measures, to bridge the crisis in the short term, and align the local economies with the global economic landscape through long-term strategies focused on knowledge-intensive, green and creative economic sectors. To be sure, there are discursive openings to post-neoliberal urban governance rationalities, especially in URBACT documents. Ample references are made to social inclusion, the provision of basic services and quality-of-life concerns. Also, questions are thrown up about the limits of local labour market strategies to fight growing social polarization and the viability of certain urban strategies in the face of public austerity, suggesting an awareness of the importance of the macro-economic and institutional conditions in shaping urban development trajectories. The OECD has embraced a 'green' approach but again this is mainly based on the idea of greening the existing growth model, a far cry from more progressive de-growth discourses that gathered momentum in the early stages of the crisis (Latouche, 2009).

3 The framework for the study was derived from the OECD LEED programme.

There is no evidence therefore of a rethinking of urban development models. Neither is there much reflection happening on macro-economic and macro-institutional parameters beyond the current model of global competitiveness. The variegated nature of the urban development trajectories of European cities may be one important element discouraging a fundamental reflection on these macro-level parameters. Indeed, as URBACT acknowledges, 'there is a risk that the extremely diversified places and people which make up the European mosaic, experience the crisis in such different ways, with varying intensities and speeds, that it fundamentally weakens the fairly fragile glue that makes European citizens feel they have a future together' (Guidoum *et al.*, 2010: 20). To conclude then, the showcasing of the diversity of local policy responses without rethinking the viability of the macro-rule regime in which this happens conveys a picture of dynamic local regulatory experimentation, and reinforces the role of cities as strategic sites for global capital accumulation and regulation.

Much more research would be needed to offer a proper CPE account of the financial-economic crisis as a source of new urban governance rationalities, but let us complete this brief illustration of how a variegated understanding of urban neoliberalization may benefit from a sustained engagement with CPE by preliminarily suggesting two selectivities that are structuring the aforementioned variation in urban crisis discourses. Firstly, both discursive sites were already in existence before the crisis, which implies that interpretations of the crisis and what it means to cities were framed through existing discursive foci and organizational settings. Within URBACT, the initial focus was on the impact of the crisis on deprived urban neighbourhoods, reflecting the leading role of the URBAMECO network⁴ in setting up the initiative (Soto, 2010). As different URBACT thematic networks (e.g. REDIS and Creative Clusters) responded to the initiative, this focus on disadvantaged neighbourhoods was diluted and a concern with entrepreneurial, creative and knowledge-intensive urban development became more prevalent (Rivas, 2009; van Winden, 2009). The roots of the URBACT initiative in the URBAN Community Initiatives for integrated urban regeneration and its concern with social cohesion in urban areas allows for questions about the limits of neoliberal urban development models. However, its institutional position as forum for the inter-urban exchange of urban policy experiences means that the crisis is predominantly framed as a challenge for individual cities, albeit with the help of mutual learning platforms such as URBACT, with few references to the competitiveness-oriented European Union rule regime in which cities operate. In the case of the OECD, a strong selectivity is the notion of a new 'movement' (Clark, 2009; OECD, 2009a) or a 'new paradigm' (OECD, 2009b) of urban and regional policy prominent since the 1980s. This new paradigm implies a more proactive approach, moving away from top-down, one-size-fits-all, local compensation programmes and a sole focus on poor areas. Instead, an entrepreneurial, internationally faced and market-based approach to urban and regional development is favoured (OECD, 2007).

Secondly, and on a more structural economic level, the socialization of the global financial-economic crisis into a fiscal crisis of the state over the course of 2010 established a second selectivity which, as Jessop (2009) has already warned, closed down the discursive space for post-neoliberal discourses in quite a powerful way (albeit unevenly, depending on the impact of the crisis on local public budgets). URBACT points out a notable shift in cities' response to the crisis between 2009 and 2010: from focusing on national recovery packages to minimizing the impact of fiscal austerity programmes (Guidoum *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, four main trends are observed: an even stronger focus on a few strategic priorities, strengthening city partnerships with public and private stakeholders, financial innovation and involving local stakeholders in rethinking problems and solutions. From the OECD perspective we get a similar picture.

4 The URBAMECO network focused on local economic development to foster regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods and fight social exclusion.

One particular measure highlighted by the OECD is the initiative by local authorities in the UK to renegotiate or delay the ‘community’ contribution that real estate developers are legally bound to make in the hope of reactivating urban regeneration (Clark, 2009: 78). This situation reflects the ‘zombie neoliberalism’ thesis, in which lack of resources pushes cities further into financial innovation, entrepreneurial and employer-led strategies and local regulatory experiments.

Conclusions

This essay has called for a sustained empirical analysis of the current global financial-economic crisis as a laboratory for urban governance rationalities. We have argued for this analysis to be theoretically informed by the variegated neoliberalization approach and integrate discourse as a constitutive dimension of capitalist variegation. Looking at how the diversity of discourses on the global financial-economic crisis and its urban effects and responses have been structured through two important strategic discursive sites, namely OECD LEED and URBACT, we conclude that the variation in discourses produced through these discursive sites pertains to the impact of and responses to, rather than the causes of, the crisis. The showcasing of local regulatory experiments, in the absence of a fundamental rethinking of the macro-economic and macro-institutional rules of the global economy, reinforces the pre-crisis discursive construct of the city as a strategic site for the deepening and extension of neoliberalization (see also Aalbers, 2013, this issue). The existing discursive and institutional selectivities of the OECD LEED and URBACT programmes, and more recently fiscal austerity, have progressively closed down discursive space for post-neoliberal regulatory experiments, although (especially for URBACT) some awareness of the limits of pre-crisis urban development models is visible (as it already was before the crisis). Further research is necessary to uncover ‘deeper’ forms of structuration of discursive variation regarding the causes, effects and responses to the crisis, and analyse the variegated retention of discourses in institutional procedures, power networks, identities and societal structures in different cities across Europe. Overall, it seems clear that we are not witnessing a questioning of the neoliberal economic and policy principles that put the process of urbanization at the centre of the 2008 crisis spiral. Instead we see a relatively geographically uneven process of refining neoliberal local policy solutions, that will supposedly allow the most competitive cities to ride the wave of the crisis into a reassembled form of neoliberalism.

Stijn Oosterlynck (Stijn.Oosterlynck@ua.ac.be), and Department of Sociology, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, University of Antwerp, M 231 – De Meerminne, Sint-Jacobstraat 2, B – 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium and Sara González (s.gonzalez@leeds.ac.uk), School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.

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