



“Vote with your feet”: Neoliberalism, the democratic nation-state, and utopian enclave libertarianism



Casey R. Lynch

School of Geography and Development, University of Arizona, PO Box 210137, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 January 2016

Received in revised form

14 March 2017

Accepted 14 March 2017

Available online 23 March 2017

Keywords:

Neoliberalism

Democracy

Nation-state

Sovereignty

Libertarianism

Territory

ABSTRACT

This paper examines a series of emerging utopian discourses that call for the creation of autonomous libertarian enclaves on land ceded by or claimed against existing states. These discourses have emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and can be seen as a response to the crisis on the part of free-market advocates who critique previous waves of neoliberal reform for failing to radically transform the existing structures of the state. Enclave libertarianism seeks to overcome neoliberal capitalism's contradictory relationship to the liberal democratic state by rethinking the state as a “private government service provider” and rethinking citizens as mobile consumers of government services. Citizens are thus called to “vote with their feet” by opting-in to the jurisdiction that best fits their needs and beliefs. The paper argues that these utopian imaginaries are key to understanding specific new manifestations of post-crisis neoliberalism, and calls for more research into the diversity of discourses and imaginaries that circulate through networks of neoliberal actors beyond specific policy initiatives.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Following the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, a number of observers speculated that the crisis could signal the end of the neoliberal era (Dumenil & Levy, 2013; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2010; Springer, 2015). Yet, eight years later there is growing consensus that neoliberal doctrine continues to drive much political, economic, and social policy across the globe. Processes of neoliberalization have accelerated, reached into new areas, and been pursued through new strategies, increasingly authoritarian means and emergent logics of securitization (Abrahamsson & Ek, 2014; Amar, 2013; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2013). For this reason, despite an abundance of literature on neoliberalism as a set of economic policies (Harvey, 2007), a logic of economization and financialization (Brown, 2015), a situated practice and process (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010), and a form of governmentality (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002), there is a continued need to unpack neoliberalism in its various guises, spatial and temporal manifestations, and complex and contingent relations (Peck, 2013).

In this paper, I build on existing literature from geography and related disciplines that approach neoliberalism as both a discourse

and set of situated practices to highlight the internal debates and dialogs within what is too often described as a singular hegemonic ideology. While scholars have examined the multiplicity of “actually-existing neoliberalisms” in practice, this article contributes to a literature that examines the emergence and evolution of multiple and divergent neoliberal discourses and utopian imaginaries (Ettlinger & Hartmann, 2015; Jones, 2012; Steinberg, Nyman, & Caraccioli, 2012; Davis & Monk, 2008; Bonnett, 2001). I examine the utopian discourses around several related proposals for autonomous libertarian city-states: Seasteading, Startup Cities, Free Private Cities, and LEAP Zones. These utopian imaginaries have gained influence since the global financial crisis, as their proponents seek out new opportunities to influence policy in moments of crisis. I argue that in order to understand the complex processes of post-2008 crisis neoliberalization, scholars must pay closer attention to the different sub-movements that operate through a broad neoliberal framework, the variations in their ideologies and visions, and the diverse strategies they employ in pursuit of these visions.

The remainder of the paper is organized into three sections. In the first section, I situate utopian enclave libertarianism as a response to the contradictions and tensions between the material reality of neoliberalism in practice, in which the state is a necessary actor in the production and reproduction of purportedly “free” markets, and aspirational neoliberal discourses in which the state is

E-mail address: caseylynch@email.arizona.edu.

seen as a limit to “freedom” and a structural barrier to continued capitalist expansion. In the second section, I consider how notions of sovereignty, territory, democracy, and citizenship are reconceptualized within emerging libertarian discourses in an attempt to bypass the contradictions inherent in neoliberalism’s relationship with the state. In these discourses, the territorial nation-state is supplanted by a fragmented geography of smaller jurisdictions governed by privatized government service providers. This model structurally forecloses the possibility of a political public and bases its conception of “democracy” on the manipulation of territory and space—referred to by some as “dynamic geography” (The Seasteading Institute, 2014)—and the assumed mobility of the abstract resident/citizen who is encouraged to “vote with her feet.” In the final section, I consider the ways these utopian discourses circulate through transnational networks of investors, activists, economists, consultants, policy-makers, and others, and come to inform actually-existing political projects and proposals. I use the case of Honduras’ Zone for Economic Development and Employment (ZEDE) to demonstrate how enclave libertarian discourses get taken up in a particular political context, and then briefly discuss three other sites in which enclave libertarian discourses circulate—a greenfield city-building project in the Republic of Georgia, the Syrian refugee crisis, and a border dispute in the Danube River.

I base this work on a close reading of documents, articles, visual material, and manifestos written or published by key actors in the enclave libertarian movement, including Mark Klugmann (2013a, 2013b, 2014), The Seasteading Institute (Friedman, 2009; Friedman & Taylor, 2012; Seasteading Institute, 2014; Balloun, 2012), Titus Gebels (2016), and the Startup Cities Institute (Caceres, 2013; Marty, 2015). I also draw on interviews with leaders of the enclave libertarian inspired ZEDE project in Honduras. My focus on the ideational aspects of enclave libertarianism does not abstract from the diverse material and lived realities that undergird such imaginaries and projects, but rather highlights how particular utopian ideas emerge and circulate, often independent of particular policy prescriptions or governmental projects. Even when these imaginaries do not have immediate policy implications or material effects, they help shape important conversations about the future of how the world may look politically, economically, and socially—and about what forms of social organization are seen as possible or desirable.

2. Neoliberalism, libertarianism and the state

Ettlinger and Hartmann (2015), through their reading of Foucault’s lectures titled *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), examine “post-neoliberalism” in Latin America’s “pink-tide” governments at the level of its professed principles and situate it discursively in relation to both liberalism and neoliberalism. They show that “post-neoliberalism” does not so much constitute a break with a previous liberal or neoliberal era of governance, as no ‘pure’ moment of liberalism or neoliberalism has ever actually existed. Rather, post-neoliberalism represents a new (and often contradictory) articulation of aspirational discourses and policies that continue to be framed and assessed in relation to liberal principles. In examining the foundational principles and proposals of enclave libertarianism, I too point toward a new discursive articulation of liberalism as it takes shape in the utopian imaginaries of libertarian activists and their emerging attempts at political intervention in Honduras and elsewhere.

2.1. Neoliberalism as discourse and practice

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2008) examines the internal logic of (neo)liberalism and its emergence as a discursive site of

power and authority. At an abstract level, he writes that—in contrast to other governmental logics—in liberalism “the market constitutes a site of veridiction ... a site of verification-falsification for governmental practice” (Foucault, 2008, p. 32). In this logic, the market is no longer understood as the object of governmental practice, but becomes discursively reconstituted as a “regime of truth,” with the price-value relationship as its fundamental law and guiding principle. Government policies are judged not on whether they are deemed just or representative of popular will, but by their adherence to this constructed economic truth and on their ability to produce economic growth and capital accumulation.

In his discussion of the emergence of German ordo-liberalism at the end of the 1940’s, Foucault expands this argument, claiming that “the market” becomes the foundation on which political authority is exercised in post-war Germany, replacing democratic representation as the discursive basis of political legitimacy. He writes that, in this case, “the economy, economic development and economic growth, produces sovereignty” (Foucault, 2008, p. 84). A paradoxical relationship thus emerges in neoliberalism, by which the state is a necessary, constitutive actor in the production and reproduction of markets in practice, while discursively painted as the limit to truly “free” markets. In this way, the neoliberal discourse—in which the state as we know it dissolves, leaving behind truly “free” markets—can be seen as a utopian fantasy. As Mannheim (1936, 341) writes “A state of mind is utopian when (a) it is incongruous with the immediate situation and (b) when passed onto actions, tend to shatter the order of things.” In *The Birth of Politics*, Foucault references Hayek’s own call to create liberal utopias: “It is up to us to create liberal utopias, to think in a liberal mode, rather than presenting liberalism as a technical alternative for government. Liberalism must be a general style of thought, analysis, and imagination” (Foucault, 2008, p. 219).

Recognizing the utopianism of neoliberal discourses, Ettlinger and Hartmann (2015), Brenner and Theodore (2002), Peck (2013) and others distinguish between neoliberalism as discourse and neoliberalism as practice. Neoliberal policies and practices can never produce the political, economic, and social outcomes projected by the utopian discourses of neoliberal thinkers and planners. As these new techniques of rule seek to create self-regulated, entrepreneurial subjects, they are met with resistance, as diverse elements of society react to the excesses and contradictions of the (neoliberal) capitalist model. Following Polanyi (1944), scholars of neoliberalism have thus examined how the market is always “re-embedded” in its social context, producing a “double movement”, as the ideology and utopian imaginaries of the capitalist class must confront and negotiate myriad complex and competing interests in practice.

In this way, neoliberalism in practice can be understood as an ongoing process of re-regulation, as “free-market” proponents seek to overcome the contradictions and conflicts inherent in their ideology and produced by their policies (Lipietz, 1992; Tickell & Peck, 1992). Thus, scholars have highlighted how—in Joyce’s (2003) words—neoliberalism constitutes a kind of paradoxical “rule through freedom.” Invoking Foucault’s notion of governmentality, Hart (2004, p. 92) writes that:

Rather than less government, neoliberalism in this view represents a new modality of government predicated on interventions to create the organizational and subjective conditions for entrepreneurship – not only in terms of extending the ‘enterprise model’ to schools, hospitals, housing estates and so forth, but also in inciting individuals to become entrepreneurs of themselves.

Key here is the notion that—in contrast to the claims put

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5118456>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5118456>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)