Informal recyclers' geographies of surviving neoliberal urbanism in Vancouver, BC

CrossMark

Josie Wittmer, Kate Parizeau[*]

Department of Geography, University of Guelph, 50 Stone Rd. East, Guelph, ON, N1G 2W1, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Based on our study of informal recyclers' experiences of well-being, we draw on "geographies of survival" to understand the challenges that these informal workers experience in a context of urban change in Vancouver, BC. This concept explains that impoverished city residents construct pathways through the urban landscape that provide shelter, access to food, spaces of safety, and community. Informal recyclers' geographies of survival are connected with urban inequality and are exacerbated by neoliberal trends in the governance of Vancouver's physical, social, and political spaces. We observe that certain users and uses of public space are defined as disorderly or illegitimate, the poor are pushed to the margins of society, and rhetorical urban revitalization and "greening" agendas are prioritized over the needs of the poor in policy making. However, neoliberal trends are inherently contradictory and can change based on local contestation and opposition. Geographies of survival are therefore an important mechanism through which informal recyclers can reclaim city spaces as they resist spatial restrictions and work to maintain their access to necessary resources. We conclude that the geographies of survival lens provides an important perspective on urban power relationships and their spatial dynamics in contemporary Vancouver.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we argue that an analysis of informal recyclers' "geographies of survival" in Vancouver, BC provides insights to the ways that neoliberal urbanism has impacted the lives and work of informal recyclers and other low-income urbanites in the city. Informal recyclers (locally referred to as "binners") collect items that they can reuse, sell, or return for a refund (i.e. beverage containers in the province of British Columbia are managed under a deposit return system). Most of these workers use informal recycling as a subsistence strategy for supplementing social assistance or other low-paid work. Recyclables and reusable items are usually recovered from waste receptacles on the street or from dumpsters in alleyways, making informal recycling a particularly public activity, and one that is often associated with the stigma of poverty and disorder.

Mitchell and Heynen's (2009) articulation of "geographies of survival" explains that impoverished city residents construct pathways through the urban landscape that "link together places to sleep or rest … locations to eat a meal or forage food, hidden corners of security and safety … and even sometimes such relatively permanent fixtures as homeless encampments or shanty towns" (613). Local manifestations of neoliberal trends, while not totalizing, are an example of an urban force that influences several factors that affect the urban poor. Neoliberal policy interventions act as a major force in the transformation of urban environments, where the redefinition of public space (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2009) often comes to exclude informal recyclers and other marginalized urban residents. Neoliberalism is a dynamic and unstable process and is susceptible to local resistance due to its contextual embedding in local institutions and practices. Neoliberal governance is therefore not static; rather it touches down in the city as multi-scalar adaptable strategies that change based on local contexts of contestation and resistance (Keil, 2002; Larner, 2000; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009).

This paper focuses on neoliberal governance as one of the trends that alters informal recyclers' geographies of survival in Vancouver by affecting the governance of public space and the provision of social services. In the context of Vancouver and its Downtown

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jwittmer@uoguelph.ca (J. Wittmer), kate.parizeau@uoguelph.ca (K. Parizeau).

Eastside (DTES; a low-income neighbourhood often framed as being in need of intervention), even well-intentioned policies and programs do not roll out evenly across the urban environment. Instead, we argue that informal recyclers' geographies of survival tend to be increasingly restricted based on the framing and transformation of urban public spaces. Urban change as experienced by Vancouver's informal recyclers is therefore a reflection of the growing physical, social, and political inequality between the city's wealthy and poor residents.

We begin by outlining the theoretical bases of geographies of survival and neoliberal urbanism. We then discuss the methods that we used in the research project informing this paper, followed by an in-depth discussion of results and research outcomes.

2. Theory

2.1. Geographies of survival

Mitchell and Heynen (2009) describe the geography of survival as "the spaces and spatial relations that structure not only how people may live, but especially *whether* they may live" (p. 611, italics in original). While their analysis focuses on surviving homelessness (see also De Verteuil, 2011; Evans, 2011; Hodgetts et al, 2012), the concept has been expanded to describe the tenuous spatial relations associated with other survival activities, including food access (Heynen, 2009, 2010; Miewald & McCann, 2014) and "safer environment interventions" for people who inject drugs (McLean, 2012; McNeil & Small, 2014).

As a concept, geographies of survival draws on the Lefebvrian right to the city, articulated by Purcell (2002) as "a call for a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond" (p.101). There is therefore a politicized imperative to the investigations of how people survive in cities, and what factors prevent them from doing so. Many of these analyses identify trends in neoliberalizing cities that endanger the survival of marginalized groups. For example, Mitchell and Heynen (2009) discuss the impact of CCTV surveillance, changes in trespass law, and the criminalization of food sharing in public spaces on homeless individuals' geography of survival in North American contexts. We have also found that neoliberal urbanism in Vancouver poses a threat to the survival of informal recyclers: restrictions on recyclers' lives and livelihoods have increased, leading to more precarious and risky ways of securing access to resources.

2.2. Neoliberal urbanism

Neoliberal urbanism is represented by a set of multi-scalar political and ideological practices whereby "rational" political and corporate authorities act to re-regulate everyday urban life by emphasizing individual responsibility, the unrestricted accumulation of capital in a free market, and the deregulation, roll-back, and privatization of public services, public spaces, and socioeconomic intervention (Keil, 2002; Larner, 2000; Mitchell, 2004). Neoliberal modes of governance are a prominent trend in the governance of urban space that contributes to a socially, economically, and spatially unequal landscape within cities. Despite its predominance in mainstream society and policy-making, urban neoliberalism is not a fixed ideology, but a phenomenon or process that is contradictory and susceptible to change in response to local contexts of resistance and opposition (Larner, 2000). To this extent, Keil (2002) states, "As a state strategy, urban neoliberalism creates new conditions for the accumulation of capital; yet it also inevitably creates more fissures in which urban resistance and social change can take root" (579).

2.3. Neoliberal urbanism in Vancouver

In recent decades, both the Province of British Columbia and the City of Vancouver have developed several political strategies and policies that exemplify the neoliberal processes and practices that Brenner and Theodore (2002) outline in their analysis of "actually existing neoliberalism" in cities: the restructuring of the welfare state; transformations of the built environment and urban form; reregulation of urban civil society; and re-representing the city. These mechanisms have touched down in Vancouver via cuts to social assistance and public service provisioning (Tremblay, 2007); a real-estate boom, the 2010 Olympic games, and the re-development of urban areas towards elite consumption (Barnes, Hutton, Ley, & Moos, 2011); increased criminalization, surveillance, and enforcement of "public disorder" (Berti & Sommers, 2010); and rhetorical agendas to revitalize and "green" the city (City of Vancouver, 2012). These characteristic elements of neoliberal modes governance act in combination with other urban forces to exacerbate the spatial and social polarization of the city.

In addition to the above understandings of poverty and disorder, recent trends in urban planning and policymaking have promoted urban redevelopment and revitalization projects that exemplify neoliberal shifts in the governance of the city (also see: City of Vancouver, 2000, 2006, 2010; Mason, 2007). These policy plans and their "greening" and "revitalization" rhetoric reflect dominant societal narratives that privilege certain uses of space while criminalizing others. Smith (2003) discusses the effect of such urban revitalization agendas, where simultaneous pressures associated with gentrification and ghettoization overlap and create inequality within the community. In this way, the DTES attracts marginalized people because of its concentration of low-barrier services and its accepting community; however, it is simultaneously encroached on by urban redevelopment towards elite consumption and services, and accompanied by the surveillance of impoverished residents. These municipal policies encourage increased "social mix", which Walks and Maaranen (2008) argue actually acts to further polarize communities and push low-income residents out. Gentrification is a highly contested issue in the DTES. Some authors argue that this type of urban change is very prevalent (Dale & Newman, 2009; Miewald & McCann, 2014; Sutherland, Swanson, & Herman, 2014; Walks & Maaranen, 2008), while some also suggest that the DTES community has been somewhat successful at keeping gentrifying forces away (Ley & Dobson, 2008).

The predominant framing of poverty in the city as "disorder" is increasingly influenced by capitalist neoliberal policymaking, but is also informed by other urban forces, such as legacies of colonialism in the city and the DTES. For example, there is a demographic overrepresentation of Aboriginal people among the low-income DTES population, and in the sample of informal recyclers participating in this research. Colonial legacies of impoverishment, abuse, and disenfranchisement have impacted the dynamics of Aboriginal poverty (Wilson & MacDonald, 2010), and the socio-cultural experiences of urban Aboriginal people in Canada is particularly complex (Wilson & Peters, 2005). As Purcell (2002) notes, too narrow a focus on economic issues implies that claims of rights to the city "must challenge the capitalist city rather than challenge, for example the racist city, the patriarchal city, or the heteronormative city" (p. 106). We therefore suggest that our analysis of neoliberal urbanism, while revealing important trends in the ways that informal recyclers' geographies of survival are threatened, is by no means a totalizing account of the many social forces that can impact one's ability to survive in the DTES neighbourhood of Vancouver.