

*1. Neoliberalism is a contested framework for analysing urban policies. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this framework.*

The concept neoliberalism has spread over the last two decades, and has many different meanings. A key distinction can be drawn between contents that emphasize market-based policies as a coherent and uniform force (Harvey) and contents that shift the focus to processes, variation and agency (Peck, Brenner, Theodore and others). What is common for both interpretations is the emphasis on pro-market institutions and policies, e.g. monetarism, tax cuts, removal of subsidies and regulations, transfer of activities from the public to the private sphere and dissolution of public agencies. It is understandable that scholars try to uncover distinctive commonalities across different contexts, given the convergence in political discourse and practice. The term “neoliberal” represents a shorthand that enables debate and analysis at a high level of abstraction, pointing at systematic features in ideology and governance. One may view this as a strength, particularly if there remains some room for local/national interpretations and adjustments (cf. Peck/Brenner/Theodore). There is by now a large literature that follows this track, exposing injustice, illiberal practices, abandoned social goals etc. in the “neoliberal city”. It is also a fact that inequalities and segregation have been rising in many Western countries – this similarity may reflect similar policies at the national and/or urban scale. A major weakness according to critics (cf. Storper, Pinson/Journal, Le Galès and others) is that scholars within this research sweep all sorts of phenomena under one umbrella. Much of the literature, according to these critics, fails to present hard evidence, and neglects differences in the political-economic background: deregulation and shift to market-based policies are typical of Anglo-American countries, but less typical in other parts of the world (e.g. Southern Europe) (Pinson/Journal Pinson/Journal, Le Galès). A related point is that metropolitan areas face a number of concrete challenges that are tackled on a pragmatic basis, with weak ideological commitment (Storper). Critics also point to a lack of clarity in the concept (e.g. a confusing mixture of liberal and anti-liberal ideas); to a flawed methodology (scholars within the tradition are unwilling to define neoliberalism) (Pinson/Journal); and to dubious political consequences: the discourse leads to reification of neoliberalism as the only viable alternative (Pinson/Journal).

It is a great plus if students are able to link the discussion to other topics in the course, such as planning, housing-market systems/policies and area-based policies/initiatives.

*2. Public participation is a big issue in planning theory. Discuss challenges and paradoxes related to achieving social equity through participatory planning processes.*

We expect some sort of definition or explanation of public participation. A key feature is that participation takes place at various *levels*, as emphasized by Sherry Arnstein and others. Arnstein (1969) presented a stepwise increase in citizen involvement, starting from the lowest level of non-participation, where people may face various forms of manipulation and normative pressure, through tokenism, where people are informed and consulted, and up to

citizen control, where people participate through partnership and delegation. A solid answer should draw some connections between levels/forms of participation on the one hand and planning traditions, planning schools and planning models on the other. One of the paradoxes is that planning originates in top-down hierarchical structures, which tend to assume uniform interests and values. Such structures exist in weaker or stronger versions even today, and represent a significant challenge for high-level participation. Another challenge is that highly disadvantaged groups may lack resources to organize themselves and select representatives. They may also lack skills and knowledge to write convincing applications for public money. What happens quite often, therefore, is that poor residents and neighbourhoods are represented by middle-class representatives, or that public money goes to residents/neighbourhoods with less urgent needs. Yet another challenge is that participation tends to delay urban development. Delays, in turn, may trigger resistance and efforts to circumvent mandatory participatory activities. These latter problems are particularly pronounced in so-called “dialogue-based participation (cf. John Friedman and Patsy Healey).

*3. Housing is commonly viewed as a difficult area of policy-making. Judged by recent research, the difficulties appear to grow over time, particularly in Western countries. What are the challenges and barriers that face policy-makers? What could be the solution(s) to the challenges?*

Housing diverges from traditional welfare policies in several respects. Firstly, it is tightly connected to market processes. Most households obtain housing by entering the housing market, whereas the state provides *correctives* to this market. A Swedish housing scholar, Bo Bengtsson (2001), therefore characterizes housing as the «market commodity of the welfare state». Secondly, housing is not a commodity that can be produced swiftly, since it requires land and involves many agents. Increasing urbanization leads to lack of land and increases tensions and spill-overs (positive and negative externalities) between different activities and groups. Change in the aims and content of policies add to these problems and peculiarities in many countries. A large-scale wave of deregulations in the 1980s and 90s removed traditional instruments such as housing subsidies, municipal land banks, market control/oversight, price ceilings and municipal programmes for housing provision. This shift from *comprehensive* to *selective* policies has left politicians with few effective tools that might neutralize or compensate for housing market problems. The major challenge in many Western cities and nations is *housing affordability*: a large section of the population cannot afford to buy the least expensive dwellings and are at the same time disqualified from public support. Housing affordability poses a particular challenge in nations that promote home ownership as a superior tenure, since these nations tend to have underdeveloped rental markets. Thus, in lack of alternatives, many households take on excessive financial risk. Indebtedness and “financialization” of the housing market are hard to mitigate or combat in the shorter term, given the longevity of the housing structure. A related challenge is increasing reliance on family support: some recruits enter the housing market with extensive economic support, which raises the threshold for other recruits. Finally, one may also mention sustainability

issues. Some countries (e.g. Norway) have a mean level of housing consumption that requires vast amounts of energy. This background complicates the revival of ambitious housing policies. What see, however, are efforts to target *urban* housing problems, e.g. through construction of new housing options (cf. “the third sector” in Norway).

Central authors in the curriculum are Bengtsson/Ruonavaara, Dewilde/Ronald, Kemeny and Tranøy/Stamsø/Hjertaker.

