Introduction

Historicizing the Neoliberal Metropolis

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How do we explain the profound transformation of metropolitan America in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first? What are the origins of now-commonplace urban policies such as tax increment financing, charter schools, enterprise zones, special services districts, public-private partnerships, and the outsourcing of city services to the private sector? Why have public employee unions struggled for survival in heavily Democratic cities? What explains the disappearance of public or social housing at the same time that cities provide massive tax abatements for corporate headquarters and luxury housing? How can we make sense of the politics and policies of gentrification? Why have governments gone from regulating businesses to incentivizing them, often at a substantial loss to municipal revenue? Why do city officials often identify as “CEOs”? Why have cities become magnets for extraordinary wealth at the same time that a majority of their residents face austerity budgets that lead to rundown parks, poorly paid teachers, and shabby, overcrowded neighborhood schools? How have local politicians and community leaders as well as grassroots organizations—community groups, unions, civil rights and black power activists—challenged but also reinforced urban plans and policies that have created and maintained inequalities by race and class?

Over the last few decades two currents of scholarship—one centered in social theory and geography, the second in history and urban sociology—have offered powerful explanations for the fate of American cities. The first focuses on the emergence of neoliberalism, emphasizing macro-level transformations in finance, modes of production, and governance, all with global origins and reach. The second is resolutely local
in its orientation, focusing on specific cities or metropolitan areas, with attention to electoral politics, social movements, and racial and ethnic conflicts. As historians, we find most work on neoliberalism to be insufficiently historical, lacking the specificity and attention to context and chronology that characterizes historical scholarship. But as scholars who have read widely across the social sciences, we are critical of historians who have, at best, ignored the vast body of work on neoliberalism and at worst dismissed it outright. In the pages that follow, we argue that it is high time to bring the conceptual framework of neoliberalism into urban historiography and, in addition, bring rigorous, place-based historical research to enrich and challenge social scientific scholarship on neoliberalization.

The very mention of the term neoliberalism arouses feelings of annoyance and skepticism among many historians, often for good reason. Few terms in contemporary scholarly discourse have been deployed more imprecisely or polemically. Today neoliberalism is a polyvalent concept that bears only superficial resemblance to its appearance in the writings of the German Ordoliberal intellectuals associated with the Mount Pèlerin Society in the mid-twentieth century who hoped to breathe new life into nineteenth-century notions of classical liberalism in the fight against regulation and social welfare.

Since the 1990s, scholars, mostly on the left, have deployed neoliberal as a blanket term to denounce contemporary capitalism and inequality. Neoliberalism is sometimes a name for the deregulatory and anti-welfare policies of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States and their successors. It is sometimes a loose description of an orientation toward the market and a faith in market-based solutions to social problems. It is most often a synonym, usually pejorative, for right-wing or conservative economic programs. In the work of many scholars, neoliberalism is also a totalizing term that blurs geographical distinctions. It has been deployed variously to describe public policies promoting free market forces and limiting the reach of the state in countries as divergent as the United States and Zambia, and as the basis for the strengthening of an oppressive state apparatus in nations as diverse as Chile and China.

Many influential theoretical works on neoliberalism share one underlying premise: Change happened from the top down. Economic elites
and their political allies, with the support of right-wing think tanks and research centers, engineered a neoliberal “turn” or “takeover” in the 1970s and 1980s that effectively restructured governments to preserve the interests of capital by deregulating financial markets, weakening labor power, cutting taxes while imposing austerity and anti-welfare policies, and privatizing education, housing, and social services. Neoliberals valorized the market and delegitimated the public sector as inefficient, corrupt, and sclerotic, even as they used the power of the state to spur financialization and restructure tax policies in service of the financial sector. In the most familiar version of this story, the triumph of a neoliberal agenda entailed or was achieved through the ability of capital to capture the state, political parties, and other institutions of civil society to forward its agenda.4

This top-down story of neoliberal triumph, laden with the theoretical trappings of Marxist political economy, has been most associated with the work of David Harvey, an urban geographer who, despite being one of the most widely cited scholars in the social sciences today, has had, until quite recently, surprisingly little influence among urban and political historians. His book, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, has become the default account of the neoliberal ascendency. But few historians of postwar metropolitan politics and economics have embraced Harvey's story of neoliberal takeover and hegemony—in large part because of his schematic framework for understanding modern political and economic history. Harvey’s analysis relies on a powerful but oversimplified distinction between two ideal types of political economy and governance. One—the social democratic—prevailed from the Great Depression through the early 1970s. Social democratic regimes promoted pro-labor policies, strong economic regulations, state-funded economic development, and a robust system of social welfare. The second—neoliberal—took form in the years following the global economic shocks in 1973. Neoliberal regimes were increasingly oligarchic, with a commitment to untrammeled capital, economic austerity, and financialization.5

To many modern American historians—including many of the contributors to this volume—Harvey’s framework appears both ahistorical and reductionist. His premise that a social democratic order prevailed in the period from the Depression to the early 1970s has been undermined by the revisionist work of scholars of the New Deal and post—
New Deal American politics. Scholars of race and gender have focused on the limited scope of the American social welfare state during the supposed heyday of liberalism, particularly its underpinnings in a system that created a two-tiered set of social policies that subordinated or excluded African Americans, Latinx, and women to the advantage of white men. Labor historians have emphasized the fragility of worker protections and unionization, particularly during the Cold War years, as corporations consolidated power and bankrolled a campaign to market the ideology of “free enterprise.” Urban historians have pointed to the deep illiberalism of urban whites, particularly around questions of racial equality in housing, workplaces, and schools. Political historians have documented the growing influence of pro-business conservatives, the religious right, anti-communists, and the resilience of a discourse of small government in the post–World War II years. If social democracy was weak at best in the United States, then the post-1973 period seems less discontinuous than Harvey and his school might suggest. The emphasis often placed on chronology by historians is not trivial in the context of understanding neoliberalization: It is impossible to understand the depth and persistence of market-based policies and political skepticism toward the welfare state that theorists of neoliberalism see emerging de novo in the 1970s and 1980s, without realizing that social democracy was always weaker than its most fervent supporters and passionate critics believed.6

One of the strengths of urban historiography—and perhaps its most generative challenge to social scientific scholarship on neoliberalism—is its attention to local and regional contexts and to history from below. Because most work on neoliberalization begins its analysis at the national or international levels, through the global workings of financialization, the maneuverings of institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank, and the rise of the Anglo-American political right in the 1980s, neoliberalism appears as an insuperable force swooping in from beyond rather than a process that was shaped and sometimes constrained by local political actors, community organizations, and social movements. Neoliberalism, as historian Julia Ott has argued, “is not a historical actor itself. We should not treat ‘neoliberalism’ as if it possessed a pre-determined historical trajectory or an essential nature.” We thus need to consider
its specificity. Neoliberalism was as much local as transnational. As the chapters in this volume show, urban activists and policymakers and citizens shaped neoliberalism, sometimes reinforcing it, sometimes limiting it, sometimes adapting it to their own agendas, such as school reform, economic “empowerment,” or community economic development. Neoliberalization was deeply contested and always incomplete.7

Historians have good reason to be skeptical of many of the fundamental claims of scholars who write about neoliberalism, but theorists of governance and political economy ask questions that pose substantive challenges to historians. We find particularly useful the work of political scientist Wendy Brown, who posits neoliberalism’s evolution from political theory to political ideology and then to a dominant rationality within a political culture that, in Brown’s words, “figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life.”8 Grappling with Brown’s insights holds the promise of pushing the history of neoliberalization beyond its current state as a framework for describing the circumstances and dynamics of late capitalism toward critical questions of causality—namely, those related to the triumph of market rationalities and the “economization’ of political life.”9 If neoliberalism, as Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy have argued, has developed as a project that celebrates “the moral benefits of market society” and identifies “markets as a necessary condition for freedom,” it is vital that we better understand the forces and circumstances on the ground that legitimated this project and made it popularly appealing. Historians are particularly well-situated to explain what made neoliberalism hegemonic in the Gramscian sense. With attention to the particulars of place and politics, of identity, interest, and ideology on the ground, historians can explain what brought about the “construction of consent” necessary for neoliberal policies to have staying power. This volume proposes an intervention along these lines.10

Two recent historiographical currents—the revitalized subfield of American political history and the vital subdiscipline of urban and metropolitan history—can help us understand neoliberalism on the ground, as it emerged in the context of everyday life, gained consent, and shaped public policies. Particularly in the burgeoning field of the “new political history,” scholars have been finely attuned to the relationship of political ideology and political institutions. But American
political historians have to a great extent remained trapped in the binary of American partisan politics, usually conflating neoliberalism and the New Right. In accounts of the rise of the New Right, a range of political languages and ideas—consumer rights, homeowners’ and property rights, meritocracy, entrepreneurialism, individualism, freedom—are crowded under the umbrella of modern conservatism, which, seen from another perspective, could be read as symptomatic of the penetration of neoliberal values into US political culture.11

While neoliberalism germinated among conservative activists and intellectuals and found its staunchest support on the political right, it gained broad assent across the political spectrum. American Democrats, like their counterparts in Britain’s New Labour Party and in many European socialist parties, came to embrace market-oriented policies, austerity, privatization, and to varying degrees enacted policies that undermined trade unions, weakened the social welfare state, and rationalized pro-business initiatives as necessary.12

Few places were more significantly affected by neoliberalism than urban centers. Municipal governments became the sites of experiments in privatization, austerity, housing, deregulatory and pro-market policies, as a number of recent studies on “the neoliberal city” or “neoliberal urbanism” by urban geographers and critical planning scholars have demonstrated.13 Innovations in urban governance proliferated because they enjoyed support across the political spectrum, part of a process of historically contingent political development. As many of the chapters in this book demonstrate, neoliberal urbanism in the United States is scarcely the distinctive product of right-wing thought or of Republican policy initiatives. It took deep hold in many Democratic Party–dominated municipalities. Indeed, beginning in the post–World War II years and intensifying in the 1970s and beyond, many liberals themselves began to challenge New Deal programs, calling for lean government, budget cuts and the reduction of municipal workforces, and the redistribution of tax revenues in the form of abatements for developers and businesses. What had been key missions of municipal governments—the provision of quality education, affordable housing, public transit, and public works and employment—withered.

The historiography of the conservative ascendency has been ill equipped to explain how figures like Richard M. Daley, mayor of Chi-
icago in the 1990s and 2000s, whose aggressive neoliberal agenda would be elevated to the national stage during the Obama era, fits into the history of modern American conservatism. It has been hard-pressed to explain how Democratic politicians, including Bill Clinton, Arne Duncan, and Barack Obama, embraced ideas about budgetary restraint, welfare cuts, public-private partnerships, or charter schools with all of the zeal of their original proponents on the political right. It cannot help us understand why mayors in big cities as diverse as Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, turned to corporate philanthropies to underwrite such urban amenities as parks and transit lines, and to fund experiments in “school reform.” Neoliberalism became a “dominant rationality” precisely because it could not be confined to a single partisan identity.14

Urban history, in particular, offers a powerful tool to understand neoliberalism in practice. Since the 1990s, the urban history of the modern United States has witnessed an extraordinary revival, launching what Matthew Lassiter calls “the spatial turn” in American history, with attention to the ways that macroeconomic policies and partisan politics reconfigured housing, education, employment, and place in the post–World War II United States.15 Historians who have examined racial divisions and racialized boundaries in metropolitan America offer insight into one of the central dimensions of neoliberalism, namely the reshaping of the very notion of the public.16

Many prominent theorists of neoliberalism ignore or downplay the importance of race. Urban geographers David J. Roberts and Minelle Mahtani have criticized their field for analytically separating questions of race and neoliberal political economy, arguing that the two need to be considered as “co-constitutive.” Neoliberalism, they argue, is more than a “socioeconomic process that has racial implications.” Instead, “neoliberalism modifies the way race is experienced or understood in society.”17 In the United States, it has been impossible to separate structural arguments about markets and privatization from moral, political, and cultural frameworks that create, reinforce, and perpetuate racial ideologies and inequalities.

American urban history offers an important corrective to the frequent silences on race in many theoretical accounts of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism shaped the opportunities, the politics, and the everyday lives of
Americans across racial and ethnic divisions but had a disproportionate effect on urban people of color because of the entanglement of race with economics. Race was also central to how Americans constructed citizenship and understood the “moral benefits” of markets. One cannot understand such neoliberal phenomena as the privatization of social housing without understanding the racialized history of American housing markets and their role in constituting different categories of citizenship. One cannot make sense of the intensification of anti-welfare and pro-carceral politics—and the belief in the salutary effects of the “discipline of the market”—outside of other disciplinary projects such as the racial stigmatization of welfare and criminal justice. One cannot discuss the challenges to publicly funded urban spaces without considering the racialized perceptions of who used and who was entitled to public spaces.  

It is a short step from the spatial turn to a nuanced history of neoliberalism in practice. If cities have been the central sites of neoliberal innovation, the insights of urban historians who have written detailed place-based case studies can help us examine the operation of neoliberalism on the ground. The scholars in this book, drawing from their original work on a diverse group of American cities, examine neoliberalization in different policy arenas, including housing (Pattillo), commercial development (Adams), municipal finance (Phillips-Fein), public-private partnerships (French-Marcelin), carcerality (Murch), gentrification (Tissot), and the non-profit sector (McQuarrie).

In this volume, we argue that the process of neoliberalization is critical to understanding politics, policy, and power in the modern American city. The actors in this history, as the contributors to this volume demonstrate, include legislators, planners, developers and business leaders, political representatives, state and civic institutions, community organizations, and ordinary citizens. While the authors of these contributions have somewhat differing visions of the contours and character of neoliberalization because our histories of the topic are still emerging, they agree on the basic idea that its advance in the postwar era has witnessed the proliferation and normalization of principles, policies, and modes of governance favoring free market solutions to a range of social, political, and economic problems facing metropolitan society, with the state playing a key role in creating the institutional frameworks for this shift.
Taken together, these chapters argue for a fresh methodological approach to the trajectory of neoliberalism. First, they offer up a new history of neoliberalization over the *longue durée* of the postwar decades to replace the prevailing story of a neoliberal takeover beginning in the mid-1970s. Second, they suggest the need to view this long march of neoliberalization from both the top-down and bottom-up in order to trace its dynamics and operations. Finally, the chapters in this volume point toward a rethinking of connections between race and neoliberalism and go a step further to consider how shifting understandings of race and its role in urban policymaking also colored neoliberalism. In the United States, it has been impossible to separate structural arguments about markets and privatization from moral, political, and cultural frameworks that create, reinforce, and perpetuate racial ideologies and inequalities.

Urban geographers Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell have powerfully argued for “a careful mapping of the neoliberal offensive—both in its heartlands and in its zones of extension—together with a discussion of how ‘local’ institutional forms of neoliberalism relate to its more general (ideological) character.” This is a set of questions that has generated important research in their field. But to understand the process of neoliberalization requires more attention to chronological variation and the ways that local, metropolitan, regional, national, and transnational scales interact. Spanning the entire United States, from the New Deal to the early twenty-first century, and including original scholarship on cities as diverse as Boston, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and New York, the contributors to this volume hope to enrich theoretical discussions of neoliberalism with a focus on context and, at the same time, generate productive questions that can guide future research on neoliberalism across disciplines, bringing a deeper historical perspective to bear on questions of contemporary importance. The chapters that follow are a starting point.

**Notes**

1 The leading intellectual historian of the 1970s and 1980s, Daniel T. Rodgers, for example, has argued against the use of the term; it only appears twice in his important account *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). See Scott Spillman, “Splinters,” *n+1* (June 8, 2011), https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/book-review/splinters/. Rodgers has more recently offered a


5 Harvey, Brief History of Neoliberalism.

Klein, Nancy MacLean, and David Montgomery, and a response by Cowie and Salvatore, 33–69.


