

## Neoliberalization and the Matrix of Action: In Conversation with Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, and Nik Theodore

— Peter Brogan

**Peter Brogan<sup>1</sup> (PB):** There's been tons of ink spilled in the last few years in efforts to try to understand different formations neoliberalism has taken and the meaning of the capitalist crisis that broke in 2008 and what that has morphed into. In that context you guys have continued to refine and rethink your theorization of neoliberalization, part of which has been a consistent argument for the need to hold onto the concept of neoliberalism/neoliberalization. Can you give me an outline about why you've made this argument for the continued relevance of understanding the contemporary period through a conceptualization of neoliberalism or neoliberalization and what's different or unique about your understanding of neoliberalism?

**Jamie Peck<sup>2</sup> (JP):** There's no point in holding onto the concept of neoliberalism for its own sake. Clearly it has to be doing some work. I think the work that it does is to force you to think through connections across different geographical sites and historical time periods. It's that impetus that it gives you to think through *connections* that is important, connections between neoliberal projects in one place and another, their family resemblances and structural features. It also provides a spur to think about opposition to neoliberalism in a more-than-local way. Neoliberalism becomes one of the

- 1 Peter Brogan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Geography at York University, Toronto, Canada. His research focuses on the geopolitical economy of contemporary capitalism, urbanization, education and teachers' unions. In May 2012 Neil Brenner, Nik Theodore and Jamie Peck sat down with Peter Brogan in Chicago to discuss their scholarship and the present political and economic conjuncture. The following interview is an edited transcript of this dialogue. In the past 10 years they have collaboratively and individually published widely on the changing dynamics of neoliberalism, urbanization and labour market change.
- 2 Jamie Peck is the Canada Research Chair in Urban and Regional Political Economy, and Professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia.

points of reference—even if it’s an extremely problematic, unloved, rascal concept—which we have to be prepared to reconstruct. It at least places all of these developments in a wider frame.

Recently, we can see how it has provided a frame through which the global financial crisis has been understood and, as it turns out, responded to. And we can see that the character of neoliberalism post-crisis is not quite the same as it was before. It has gone through another of its mutations. At the same time, it is still recognizably neoliberal, even as it is being actively reproduced at such moments. The work it does as an ideological formation is an important part of understanding the present crisis, and the extremely ideologically constrained responses to that crisis that we’ve witnessed. Of course, it was not absolutely predictable and necessary that the ideological and political responses have been constrained. The neoliberal frame will not hold forever. But that’s the way things have worked out, at least so far. We need to try and understand the limitations of the responses to neoliberalism and why it’s been possible to resuscitate a form of market rule on the back of a crisis manifestly created by the excesses of monetization and deregulation; how a kind of Houdini escape has been fashioned once again.

But I don’t think it offers you any pat, easy answers to this question. And certainly it’s not an excuse for saying; ah, it’s just neoliberalism again, end of story! That isn’t an explanation. Invoking neoliberalism is the beginning of an explanation, not the end. You’ve actually got to get in and amongst the processes of institutional transformation, which I think is one of the reasons we argue for working at different levels of analysis, rather than just having an entirely macro-level understanding of neoliberalism. This is why we insist on exploring how neoliberalization is reproduced through all these domains—the institutional, the ideational, the ideological, the social and so on—as a contradictory process. And so that’s why we’ve argued for a fairly refined and complex notion of how this process works.

**Neil Brenner<sup>3</sup> (NB):** I would just add a couple of things to Jamie’s arguments. First, we agree with the tradition of Neo-Gramscian political economy that there is a world-historical, epochal struggle under capitalism over the form and extent of commodification. Throughout the history of capitalism there has been an ongoing political and institutional struggle to determine how far commodification processes can be extended into the fabric of society. Obviously both the classical liberalism

---

3 Neil Brenner is a Professor of Urban Theory at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

of the late 19th century and neoliberalism of the post-1970s period represent internally distinct sets of approaches to this problem that involve creating specific types of regulatory infrastructure designed to intensify the extension of commodification across society and across space. And the kind of Keynesian interlude that, broadly construed, obtained after World War Two can be construed as an attempt, albeit unevenly developed, to insulate the fabric of society from processes of commodification.

So in this sense, our own use of the term neoliberalization is a way of trying to demarcate the historical and geographical specificity of the post-1970s regulatory reorganization of capitalism—it is not simply an ideological movement or a political alliance, but a pathway and trajectory of regulatory reorganization. This reorganization has involved a renewed attempt, as Jamie has said, to intensify market rule at every spatial scale. But having said that—and I now turn to the latter part of your question—we are equally interested in uneven regulatory development. What this means is that the process of extending and intensifying market rule in the post-1970s period has been deeply unevenly developed, both spatially and temporally: it does not simply unfold in state-by-state or city-by-city, but involves regulatory recalibrations that crystallize a kind of wave like process in which inherited institutional infrastructures, including those inherited from postwar Keynesianism undergo processes of institutional creative destruction, generating new institutional landscapes in which markets are promoted and commodification is extended. This is not simply a unilinear succession, along the lines of a total dismantling of Keynesianism followed by the rise of a new, neoliberalized regulatory formation.

In effect, our usage of the term neoliberalization is a first-cut attempt to demarcate the broadly developed force field of strategies and struggle in and around market rule in the wake of the collapse of the Keynesian compromise. Our arguments about the uneven development of regulation and the regulation of uneven development are an attempt to understand the different ways in which this process of regulatory restructuring unfolds, without embracing a traditional phase model of capitalist regulation in which one fully formed phase disappears and another fully formed model emerges. For us, neoliberalism is not a model at all—it is an unevenly developed process of market-oriented regulatory reorganization.

**JP:** Because we have to remember that absolute market rule is impossible. So the process of neoliberalization not trending towards some complete or

fully articulated condition. That's why we think of neoliberalization as a transformative process, not as a label for this or that economic system or phase of development; it shapes a paradigm of restructuring. It's a process of continuing to intensify, displace, and reschedule contradictions which are endemic to the prevailing regime of market-oriented development, corporate rule, and social discipline. But while neoliberalization is strategically focused in this way, it's also repeatedly failing.

So, in a sense that's why we're interested both in perpetual restructuring, crisis-driven experimentation, and what are often improvised, zigzagging responses to failure—which is inevitable because there is no historical trend towards absolute market rule. Yet that's the unattainable destination, the conservative-neoliberal utopia which remains the inspiration of these projects, but must not be seen as a prediction of where they are leading. Hence the necessity for critical work on actually existing transformations of neoliberal rule, neoliberal policy failures, new forms of experimentation, and so on. You can't just read *The Road to Serfdom* and conclude, "Ah-ha, this is the plan!" Actually, it works out very differently—always unpredictably, and always reshaping the political terrain.

**Nik Theodore<sup>4</sup> (NT):** So then the analytical and the political are linked by a shared concern to understand the terrain across which neoliberal projects are being prosecuted, as well as the processes through which they occur and of course their material effects. I really do believe the analytical and the political are firmly bound together with a set of shared concerns to understand the contours and limitations of neoliberalization.

**PB:** I want to bring in the urban dimensions of all this because I think this is where you guys have been pushing the theoretical and political envelope in your work on neoliberalization. In what ways have cities played central and strategic roles in not just the extension of neoliberalism in the post-2008 crisis period, but the entrenchment or resurgence as you put it? Conversely, how should we understand cities as sites for the renewal of organized resistance to neoliberalism?

**NB:** One simple way to start in explaining our position on this is through a distinction we made a long time ago between the neoliberalization of urbanization and the urbanization of neoliberalism. This is a kind of short-

---

4 Nik Theodore is an Associate Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and former Director of the Center for Urban and Economic Development (CUED) at UIC.

hand, but it's simply a way of saying two things. On the one hand, if you're interested in looking at urban governance during the last thirty years, you can see a tendential reorganization of local institutional arrangements in ways that promote, intensify and extend market rule as opposed to earlier, managerial and distributionist orientations. As David Harvey argued back in 1989, reorientation has been transformed since the 1970s from postwar concerns with social reproduction and redistribution, towards the priorities of economic development, place promotion and territorial competitiveness.

Of course, this realignment has been documented extensively in the literature on urban entrepreneurialism and local economic development; it's a pretty well-established argument. To some degree Jamie's more recent work criticizing Richard Florida and the idea of the creative city is a further development of that discussion—economic development is now connected to broader questions of culture and place identity. But, on the other hand, if you flip that idea around, it is also possible to observe various ways in which projects of neoliberalization around the world are now increasingly contingent upon the reorganization of urban built environments themselves. So it's not just that cities and urban governance systems get neoliberalized, but that the broader, global project of neoliberalization is increasingly anchored in specific places—it doesn't just involve reorganizing wide rule-regimes governing, say, financial transactions, trade and capital investment, but hinges massively upon investments in built environments to facilitate a kind of neoliberal societal project. To some degree some of David Harvey's recent work interpreting the global financial crisis as an urban crisis provides a very useful entry point into that idea—it goes beyond his earlier concept of urban entrepreneurialism to suggest that neoliberalism is today itself being urbanized in important ways.

**JP:** And I'm just remembering one of the conversations that we had 10 years ago when we were setting up the workshop that Nik and Neil put on here. It's the anniversary of this event that we've been marking this weekend. There was an early preamble to the original meeting, I remember, that raised the question of whether we should understand the urban and the city as a privileged scale where these processes work out, where the politics are played out, or a vital scale? And as a result of this conversation, we decided that we didn't want to say that it was privileged in a straightforward way, but rather that it is vital; you need a multiscale reading of these processes to really make sense of them. So we don't sequester key processes or certain

kinds of politics to one scale; we don't say that neoliberalization is a process that operates primarily at this scale or it is a creature of this scale, because it clearly operates across scales. But perhaps one of the more neglected scales—until relatively recently—has been the urban.

The Neo-Gramscian strand of political economy talks very powerfully about the global. And we have a whole literature about national transitions to different forms of neoliberalism, say in Britain and Chile, and the politics of Thatcher and Pinochet. What didn't exist 10 years ago was thinking about how the urban scale was connected to these wider transformations, and how cities had become a vital scale both for the projects' reproduction and its contestation. So the city becomes a kind of crossroads, where you find some of its most excessive forms of neoliberal politics and the strongest forms of resistance, but it's not only that scale that matters. We wanted to place an understanding of urban political economy in this broader context. And we can all see now how the most recent financial crisis as partly incubated in the American housing market, but was constituted globally at the same time. We can also see how speculative dynamics, financialization, and capital switching have driven an epic city-building across China in the last 20 years, but as Harvey has argued that's a development of world-historical significance, not just an urban thing. It's simultaneously a global phenomenon. So we would argue against the privileging of one scale or another. Yet, we also argue that the urban needs to be taken seriously, alongside those other scales which in many respects are well documented in political-economic work. The urban really needed to be integrated into these accounts, far more effectively than it was 10 years ago. There has been a lot of progress on this front in recent years.

**NB:** Just a couple other things on this. First, a really important point for us hinges on the concept of the secondary circuit of capital which was developed in the 1970s by Lefebvre and Harvey. According to this idea, in a time of crisis, capital floods into the built environment as a potentially safe refuge – so urban property markets may experience particularly intense investment pressures precisely under conditions of industrial decline. This insight certainly provides some purchase on contemporary neoliberalization patterns in cities—but insofar as such property markets are also, today, tightly connected to global financial markets and instabilities, they certainly no longer provide the kind of “safe haven” from crisis tendencies that they appeared to offer during previous rounds of economic crisis. This dimension of neoliberalization

has been very productively explored by Manuel Aalbers and others in their recent work on the financialization of urban land markets.

Second, equally important to our interest in cities is that cities are sites of important forms of ideological work: they are represented, in media and policy discourse, as sites of crisis and policy failure, and simultaneously, they are situated rhetorically and practically as the target zones for increasingly punitive, repressive and exclusionary “solutions” to those issues. In this ideological trope, which is repeated in various ways across the global urban landscape, the city thus becomes the arena for both problem and solution—regulatory failure and market-based pathway out of the crisis. Now that the failures of these market-based “solutions” to earlier regulatory failures are also becoming blatantly apparent within urban built environments around the world, can new or revamped forms of neoliberalized regulation be layered on to already deeply crisis-stricken, tendentially marketized regulatory environments? Or will this situation provide an opening for alternative mobilizations, urban and otherwise, that challenge the illogics of market authoritarianism and hypercommodification?

**PB:** That’s the thing I want to push on, because in an earlier interview Nik and I discussed new organizational forces like the Right to the City (RTTC) Alliance and other non-traditional urban struggles and movements that have emerged to contest neoliberalism in the United States.<sup>5</sup> I want to ask where you think some of these struggles have moved in the past few years. In particular could you talk about different efforts to scale up or to build interurban networks like the Right to the City Alliance and amongst domestic workers and so on? Occupy is another kind of movement which is very place-based but also has this kind of urban, translocal dimension to it. What’s going on with these struggles?

**NT:** One of the important aspects of the RTTC Alliance is that it establishes a framework for local action but one that connects those actions across different localities. And so a national framework was in place to respond to the very financialization crises that Neil was just mentioning. So when the housing market tanked and the bubble burst and the wave of foreclosures began to hit low-income, predominantly African American and Latino communities, you had a set of organizations that had

---

5 Hugill, D. and P. Brogan. (2011). The Everyday Violence of Urban Neoliberalism: An Interview with Nik Theodore. *MRzine*. <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/theodore050411.html>

aligned both to engage in struggle in their local communities but also to scale up that struggle to target what they viewed as some of the principle actors in that hardship, the banks. And so next week [early May 2012] you'll see the RTTC Alliance ally with other networks like the National Day Laborers Network and the National Domestic Workers Alliance to descend on Charlotte, North Carolina - the home of Bank of America.

This is similar to the alliance that formed about a year ago in Boston where a number of social movement organizations went to the streets to target Bank of America and other financial leaders to call attention to the foreclosure crises, which is disproportionately being wrought on low-income African American and Latino communities. And so it's through those types of social movement formations that you're able to do two things: deal with the local specificities of the crisis, but then scale up the struggle to go after financialized capital which operates not just locally but transnationally.

**JP:** I believe that this is also a case where political responses to neoliberalism, even though they may begin at the local scale, and in many ways may need to, they do not stop at this scale. While resources and capacities can be built at the local level, experiments can gain traction at the local level, it's crucial that the horizons of action and imagination exceed the local. The local is invariably where organizing starts, where mobilization begins. The logic, rationale, and the power structures of neoliberalizing regimes always exceed the local, however. So political responses—counter-neoliberal actions—have got to attack those targets, as well as taking on immediate issues at the local scale. The living wage movement is a good example, a movement which begins local and specific but which builds up and out as it develops.

**NT:** And what these networks do is create spaces within which to develop a shared analysis. They are spaces to communicate that analysis to a wider public and they are spaces, crucially, to link up local resistance into something larger—something regional, national or international. So they are a strategic response to the globalizing, destabilizing and displacing effects of neoliberalization. They are a way to try to project beyond the local and try to reveal at least some of the root causes of social suffering. Usually when we think of “roots” we think of them as being local. But the root causes primarily are extralocal. This it requires resistance to move to a position of extralocal resistance, to something beyond the local. You can see this notion contained in the World Social



Forum, for example. The creation of those types of formations show that, even 20 years ago, activists worldwide were starting to think in this way.

**PB:** I want to push on this question of resistance a bit further. It seems to me rather important to interrogate the fact that rather than coming out of one the worst crises periods in capitalism since 1929, arguably, with a more revitalized and fighting spirit movement of the left, both in North America and globally, to push for an alternative global rule regime or even more local alternatives to neoliberalism, what we have instead are working class and oppressed people on the defensive everywhere. In city after city the working class is being hit with massive austerity and from a progressive perspective we should have been able to take better advantage of this crisis, as people fighting for social justice. So, as your work has argued instead of taking advantage of the crisis to push forward socially just alternative we have this entrenchment of neoliberalism rather than a development of real alternatives. Why?

**JP:** One way of addressing this question is to first ask how neoliberalization works. It actually works as a kind of refraction and displacement machine. So a fiscal crisis which was germinated by the banks is refracted into a state crisis and projected onto marginalized populations. And so we get this period of austerity politics. It's in this hall of mirrors that neoliberalization does its work, making sure that others pay for the cost of crisis. It also has a kind of shape-shifting character, exhibiting different forms, inhabiting different political shells. This means that it's extremely elusive and intractable politically. It can leave many of its opponents flat footed as a result. And because we've gone through 30 years or so of neoliberalization, which has targeted organized labor and other sources of potential opposition, the foundations from which counter-responses might be constructed have been eroded. That gradual incapacitation has not been accidental, it's been an explicit goal of the project.

The current crisis has morphed into an attack on public-sector unions, now that something like half the remaining union members in the United States are in the public sector. In a sense neoliberalism is always going to take the fight to you, to the remaining sources of resistance. What the left I supposed needs to do is figure out a sort of jiu-jitsu move that would enable different kinds of responses to be imagined, to exploit the weight of the opponent. Because clearly just relying on the old structures which have just been under relentless attack for decades is not going to be sufficient. It may be a place to

start but it's never going to be enough on its own. So that's why you need different kinds of coalitions, you need to think across scales in different ways and connect struggles in different locations.

**NT:** In addition to that, many of the recent counter-neoliberalization moves that we have seen remain, in our terms, “disarticulated” in this time of crisis. They are disarticulated in the sense that explicit extralocal linkages—nationally, continentally and globally—are still, in most cases, only emergent. They may be gathering steam now, but at the onset of the crisis they were not capable of offering a plan that could avoid the false choices and politically rigged tradeoffs that have been presented by centrist and right-wing politicians. So the progressive response—in terms of offering alternatives to neoliberalism, to austerity politics, and to the goal of restoring corporate profits above all else—was not up to the task. I would add that from a political standpoint, the state of our public intellectuals is likewise not up to the task. There are not enough progressive public intellectuals who can clearly articulate an alternative vision and program, and seize upon the strategic openings that are created during times of crisis. But in defense of grassroots social movements let's be clear that the social violence of the crash was visited most severely on marginalized communities, and while we may have wished or hoped for a more coherent and comprehensive response, the reality was they had to deal with the crisis first and foremost. In times of upheaval, sometimes you have to take care of the more immediate needs of your community, which makes it difficult to articulate the grand alternative.

**PB:** You gotta put the fires out.

**NT:** You must put the fire out; to stop the house from burning. And that was a major challenge. So our position would be to not judge social movements, and even public intellectuals, too harshly. We understand the constraints imposed during a time of crisis, but let's remember for the future that you've got to strike when the moment presents itself. Progressive alternatives need to be put forward precisely at the moment when upheaval is greatest, since it is in those moments that public attention is most fixated on social problems and the search for potential solutions.

**NB:** I would add to that one specific point: it is very important to transpose the fight for redistribution into broader critiques of the capitalist character of production in the world today. Obviously, the distribution of wealth, the surplus, matters a lot, and the Occupy movement has

very effectively problematized this. But that shouldn't distract us from a broader discussion about how economic life is organized—for instance, about the ramifications of private ownership and control over investment decisions that affect the entire world (socially and environmentally); about the endless reinvestment of socially produced surpluses in pursuit of privately appropriated profits; and about the financialization of huge dimensions of everyday life and public resources (including, in a neoliberal era, not only housing and food but, in many contexts, water and clean air).

In other words, there's a broader question here about social and political control over the surplus, at any spatial scale, and in my view this needs to be debated and to remain on the agenda for the Left. Such concerns do not displace the issue of redistribution; they are tightly connected and reinforce one another in powerful, productive ways. It may be useful, in other words, to re-appropriate and update some of the ideas about economic democracy that were mobilized by European communist and socialist movements during the interwar period and, later on, within the certain strands of Eurocommunism and the New Left in the wake of '68.

**PB:** I want to push on this a little bit and get all you guys to chime in because I was going to ask this question before you made these comments, Neil. Should progressive forces be trying to build counter hegemonic strategies to neoliberalism or counter hegemonic strategies and alternatives to capitalism? And what's the difference between the two? I think in some ways Neil put it squarely when he said we need to raise critical questions about what the economy is for and how we make decisions about production and not just redistribution. Because I feel like this has been a common critique of regulation theory, and it can be leveled at some of your work, which is that if we're going to focus so much on neoliberalism/neoliberalization as a mode of regulation we don't necessarily see or put the priority on the underlying system of capitalist production.

**JP:** I wouldn't see those as mutually exclusive choices. Neoliberalism can be seen as the current historical form of capitalism, its contemporary expression if you like. This is the kind of institutional, ideological shape that capitalism has taken and this is also the landscape from which alternatives will have to be mobilized and articulated. So understanding this terrain is going to be important for how you can develop transformative responses to the present reality. But clearly you would never want to just stop at the institutional level; you can't expect to achieve much simply by

switching neoliberal institutions for, say, retro-Keynesian ones. These are both essentially liberal responses to regulating capitalism, and need to be understood as that. The agendas of anti-capitalist struggles and visions are clearly much more expansive than that. This said, I think one of the worst misrepresentations of regulation theory, one that is still out there, is that it's a kind of nostalgic yearning for a return to Fordism and Keynesianism, those thirty golden years after the Second World War, and if you could just get that system going again everything would be fine!

Clearly this is not possible in the world we live in now, neither would it address the racial and gender inequities, ecological problems, and such like, of the Fordist-Keynesian regime. We need something different than that. It's kind of interesting though that the vacuum created in the financial crisis and the Wall Street crash, just about all that was sucked into that vacuum was a kind of retro-Keynesianism, which seemed to last for a couple months before we found ourselves back with some rebooted version of the neoliberal program. And the public intellectuals that were calling for this were the likes of Stiglitz and Krugman. There was no other story in the mainstream debate around the crisis. There was clearly a vacuum there. But that was all there was to fill the void in that moment. At least in terms of the mainstream conversation about what the meaning of the crisis was and what appropriate responses were. So clearly you've got to transcend that. The inadequacy of that is self-evident.

**PB:** I think that's a really important clarification. I don't know if you guys want to come in on that.

**N.B.:** I agree with what Jamie just said. Many of the major disagreements in those classic debates between Bob Jessop and the British journal *Capital and Class* related less to matters of substance – the interpretation of what capitalism is and how to change it – but rather to questions of method – the question of which level of abstraction was most relevant to particular types of analytical and political concerns. One side emphasized the CMP (the capitalist mode of production) on a very high level of abstraction, whereas Jessop built upon such arguments and – much like we do in our present work – emphasized a meso-level of abstraction connected to the regulation of that mode of production and its associated contradictions.

Jessop's then-claim, and our claim now, is not that capitalism can be reduced simply to the institutions of regulation –this is not an institutional ontology but a stratified ontology in which different layers of reality are

expressed in different ways at each level of abstraction. One payoff of this stratified conceptualization of reality is that it permits analysis of the concrete institutional and regulatory forms in which broader, systemic features of capitalism are expressed. This in turn permits consideration of path-dependencies—whether of Keynesianism, of first-wave neoliberalizations or of second-wave neoliberalizations – through which institutions may demonstrate resilience even in the face of systemic pressures associated with accumulation processes and crisis tendencies. If you're only operating with abstract models, looking for "pure" expressions of capital's dynamics, it is difficult to explain the variegated institutional and regulatory geographies that we have tried to explore in our work—they are often quite dysfunctional from the point of view of capital, but they are also not easy to dismantle or creatively destroy for a whole range of contingent political reasons. But, more generally, I think that many arguments from structuralist variants of Marxism are quite compatible with—and can very usefully inform—the institution-centric and regulationist analyses that we and others have been developing.

**JP:** It's important to note that one of the ways in which neoliberalism works is through the downscaling and outsourcing social risk. That also explains why the contradictions tend to pile up in cities. Because essentially everybody's passed the buck down until it can't be passed any further. In many ways this is quite specific to neoliberalization, or at least there is a particular nexus between neoliberalization and urbanization. I think if you paid some attention to that it will help give you a sense of the structure of the present terrain and what it means to try and respond to the challenges of neoliberalization, financialization, and the extension of corporate power in this historical moment. So the broader questions about capitalist transformation are always there, but you have to get at them by understanding some of these ideological and institutional realms that create the kind of matrix for action in the present time.

**PB:** What do you think are the biggest challenges – politically, strategically and theoretically – for mobilizing a counter hegemonic alternative to this resurgent neoliberal capitalist world that we're confronted with and embedded in?

**NB:** We might want to break this question down and start with some of the problems with social-scientific analyses of neoliberalization. A lot of social-scientific research on neoliberalization, for example, might not have an immediate payoff for the practical question of what is to be done,

but we would argue that it still is really important, especially insofar as it contributes to theoretical conceptualizations of contemporary institutional and spatial transformations. From my point of view, a big part of what theory does is to illuminate the essential properties of structures and processes that exist in the world, and thus to clarify the parameters of necessity and possibility given current institutional arrangements. While such arguments may not have immediate consequences or payoffs for questions of political strategy, I believe that they can inform activism and the work of social movements by helping them understand what they are dealing with—systemically, institutionally, politically and so forth.

This kind of argument is sometimes met with frustration by colleagues and friends who want theory to offer direct insights into the strategic questions that are of such urgent concern to the Left. This is not an unreasonable demand, but I also would strongly defend the moment of abstraction, as distinct from immediate questions of practice, as also being hugely relevant to the work of the Left. Simply put, sometimes you have to wrestle with a theoretical problem in a focused way, as a basis for illuminating the dynamics and tendencies that obtain in the world, before you can even begin to figure out how that analysis might morph, on a more concrete level, into arguments about strategies and tactics. This position resonates a bit with the one Theodore Adorno took, very defensively, at the end of his life in relation to the activists of '68 who viewed his work as too theoretically distant. While I would not necessarily stand by that particularly austere conception of theory I do think that Adorno's position continues to have relevance for us today.

Part of the freedom which theory offers is precisely connected to the fact it's not an immediate handmaiden to instrumental, practical concerns—that is how I understand Adorno's position in relation to the '68ers. In other words, it is precisely the autonomy of theory from the question of what is to be done that gives it a certain power to engender utopian and radical thinking about possibilities that might barely be visible in the everyday world. That's of course not the only function of theory, and here I would not go as far as Adorno did in distancing himself almost totally from the realm of practice. But I do believe in that moment of theory as a pulse of freedom, as a projection beyond the present into a realm of the possible.

**JP:** Something that is both a near-term and a strategic challenge is how to escape the localist trap. If, in a strategic sense, one of the consequences of the way in which neoliberalization has worked is that it has backed the

Left into local enclaves. In a practical sense, Left responses to neoliberalism may therefore have to begin with local action, but the local enclave cannot be the limit of the Left's imagination or ambition. But to get out of the trap, and to start to think much more translocally about political strategies, is a real challenge. There's a huge challenge in figuring out how you move from those local responses to something that is more organized across scales and internationally. I'd say so far the kinds of networking that we have seen is suggestive, but it remains relatively frail. And certainly it is not enough to carry the project of countering neoliberalism to its next stage. Globalizing resistance networks have been around for a couple of decades but in a sense we're still trying to figure out how to take that next step, to move from these loosely networked global responses to something more generalized, which actually starts to tackle the rules of the game and turn around the rules of the game, which are still being organized according to the logic of finance capital and the logic of competition. The dominant rules of the neoliberal game also undermine local forms of resistance and counter-politics, not coincidentally, both in strongholds and in other places. Working extra-locally is the next step.

NT: We come from a tradition that values both action and thoughtful reflection. I think one of the positive developments, when you look at formations like the Right to the City Alliance, is that they act, they use that activity as a way to generate an analysis, they then reflect on that analysis and action, and they act again. So it's not an approach that says there's a distinct time for thinking and then you act. Instead, you see an approach to social struggle that may turn to abstract analysis and theoretical reasoning, but then merges these with an on-the-ground analysis of contemporary conditions, and sees this as an ongoing process of action and reflection. This praxis can propel social struggle forward in ways that you may not have predicted at the outset of an action. It is both trying to forge a path towards social justice while reacting to the everyday realities and the obstacles that are put in that path. And you can only do that by simultaneously acting and reflecting, making the road as you walk, so to speak. I think we're deeply sympathetic with that approach, and to the extent that our work has informed progressive social movements, even in a small way, we feel gratified and, I dare say, honored.