

*Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures*, Mark Purcell. Routledge, New York, 2008. 224 pp., maps, tables, illustrations, notes, references, index. Paperback, \$31.95.

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An expanding body of critical geographic literature now documents the impacts of neoliberalism on cities in advanced capitalist societies. Incisive critiques have detailed how the paradoxical operational logics of neoliberal urban policy, the disparity between ideological discourse and material outcomes and the disenfranchisement engendered by evermore commodification and privatization, have made cities increasingly undemocratic, revanchist, and driven by the requirements of capital accumulation. Whilst this research has done much to expose the internal contradictions of the neoliberal project, particularly surrounding the rescaling and re-regulation of the state, in *Recapturing Democracy*, Mark Purcell suggests “there is a danger that as we develop a robust critique of the various injustices of neoliberalization, we will focus only on the doors it is closing. If we highlight instead the contradictions of, and the emerging resistance to, neoliberalization, we can clearly see the countless opportunities it is leaving open” (p. 3). Purcell aims to illuminate such fissures in neoliberalism’s hegemony through developing a workable, politicized theorization of radical democracy. This, he suggests, can open the space to resist the neoliberalization of urban life and enable us to envision more progressive urban futures.

Purcell expands his thesis through four chapters. Chapter 1 presents a summary of critical geographical engagements with neoliberalism. Through it, Purcell lays out how such research has explored processes of rescaling and restructuring in the global economy, and the hegemonic ascension of neoliberal political-economic thought and policy implementation. Purcell’s own theorization of neoliberalism draws on two key suppositions: firstly, despite its rhetoric, the political goal of neoliberalization is not the beneficent extension of open, competitive markets and the retraction of the state, but rather the transformation of state policy to better meet the needs of capital. Secondly, neoliberalism is understood as a process, *neoliberalization*, which is never complete, instead occupying a position of (albeit temporary) hegemonic dominance.

Chapter 2 provides an illuminating review of existing democratic theory. Through unpacking the ideological and operational complexities of liberal, deliberative, participatory, and revolutionary democracy, as well as radical pluralism, Purcell expertly decouples dominant hegemonic linkages between neoliberalism and (liberal) democracy. Influenced by the anti-essentialism of Mouffe and Laclau, he draws on particular elements of each democratic school to expound the ways in which democratization might be used to challenge neoliberalization. These two chapters serve to frame the innovative argument which constitutes *Recapturing Democracy’s* substantive contribution, yet they also act as a solid introduction to existing literature and debates on neoliberalism and democracy for those wishing to get a handle on these complex, important concepts.

In Chapter 3, Purcell develops his theorization of “radical democratization and radical equalization” through elaborating a set of “oppositional democratic attitudes”. These “attitudes” are embedded within a social movement model of agnostic (as opposed to

antagonistic) leftist politics and alternate from rejecting hegemonic and “common-sense” understandings of democracy (p. 77) to developing “a clear commitment to oppose neoliberalization” (p. 83). Purcell initially frames the argument abstractly, but moves to mobilize his construction of radical democratization, in a manner that is both spatial and urban, through an interpretation of Lefebvre’s “right to the city”. This critical engagement is one of the book’s main strengths. Acknowledging the latent power of the term, but also its increasingly empty populist rhetoric (pp. 90-92), Purcell systematically develops an interpretation of the “right to the city” which remains open and flexible enough to avoid dogmatism, yet becomes grounded in an applied political framework. In premising his interpretation upon; (1) the construction of a “right” as a claim, rather than a formalized privilege codified in law, thus continually struggled for; and (2) the development of a trifecta of such rights to “appropriation”, “participation”, and most significantly, “inhabitation”, Purcell provides a much needed critique of the “right to the city” and proffers a constructive framework through which it might be deployed.

Chapter 4 grounds Purcell’s radical democratic manifesto through four case studies exploring the neoliberalization-democratization problematic in two western American cities. The first case examines the politics of gentrification in inner-city neighborhood of South Lake Union, Seattle. The second engages with the potential and pitfalls of deliberative democracy surrounding redeveloping Seattle’s waterfront. The third, more detailed study, unpacks the politics of a Superfund clean-up of Seattle’s Duwamish River, illustrating how diverse groups can mobilize as a “network of equivalence”. Purcell’s final case is a cautionary tale of homeowner groups in the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles which argues that democratic movements are not necessarily progressive, and may themselves utilize exclusionary politics. These short empirical cases greatly benefit Purcell’s argument as they illustrate the concrete application of theory to the complexities of actually existing social struggles. The book concludes with a summation of the potential limitations and promises of Purcell’s radical democracy, and a brief discussion of the implications of moving the “right to the city” beyond the confines of western cities, both to rural struggles against neoliberalization, and the global South.

*Recapturing Democracy* presents a provocative framework through which we can begin to think about creating more democratic urban polity; however Purcell’s argument is circumscribed by a tension arising from his conceptualization of the neoliberalism-democracy problematic. By choosing to oppose the *process* of neoliberalization, Purcell levels his critique at the *extension* of neoliberalizing capitalist relations, rather than the contradictory ideas and social relations driving this process. Whilst this strategy certainly opens the possibility for democratic alternatives in theory and practice, it does not adequately confront the material (economic, political, property) relations (re)producing the capitalist city. Radical democratic equalization becomes confined to the political sphere, rather than being fully extended into the economic relations that are at the heart of the capitalist imperative of neoliberalization. Purcell’s radical democracy is, importantly, premised upon political practice and contestation, yet the struggle for democratization becomes the Sisyphean end, rather than the means to create a more socially just city. This establishes a less ambitious, more limited politics than Purcell might have forwarded, but nevertheless, it does offer a tantalizing vision of- and strategy to begin to move towards- a potentially “more public, more

collective, and more democratic world than either neoliberalization or the liberal-democratic state can provide” (p. 85).

*Recapturing Democracy* constructs a thoughtful and challenging argument for an open democratization of urban life. Alongside Leitner, Peck and Sheppard’s recent edited collection, *Contesting Neoliberalism* (2007) – whose broad scope engages with diverse theoretical and empirical approaches to progressive urban politics – Purcell’s monograph is a welcome, lively and innovative addition to current urban and geographical scholarship seeking to confront neoliberalism. *Recapturing Democracy* provides a solid introduction for students interested in neoliberalism, democracy, and social justice, but more, the substantive argument of the book should stimulate vigorous debate amongst those seeking to produce a more progressive urban society, both within the academy, and on the street.

Works Cited:

Leitner, H., Peck, J., and Sheppard, E. S. (Eds.). (2007). *Contesting neoliberalism: Urban frontiers*. New York: Guildford Press.