

Accepted paper for POLLEN2020 Conference, <https://pollen2020.wordpress.com/>

22-25 September 2020

Elia Apostolopoulou, <https://eliaapostolopoulou.wixsite.com/website>

The uneven geographies of China's Belt and Road Initiative: Authoritarian neoliberal urbanism, social inequality and grassroots resistance in London, Athens and Sri Lanka

In this paper, I aim to trace the links between infrastructure-led development, socio-spatial transformation and inequality in China's Belt and Road Initiative. By theorising the BRI as primarily a spatial fix (Harvey 2016) to the overaccumulation problems of Chinese capitalism (Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019), I explore these links both theoretically and through the exploration of three cities where BRI projects are currently being materialised. For the latter, I am drawing on a review of primary and secondary sources, including articles from the literature, online sources and social media, as well as insights from ongoing research in the UK, Greece and Sri Lanka consisting both on ethnography and online interviews. By exploring how the BRI transforms the geographies of everyday lives in specific cities across the Global South and North, I aim at contributing on recent critical geographical scholarship on the BRI, address the limited empirical engagement with the on-the-ground reality of its implementation while also engaging with broader research on neoliberal urbanism, socio-spatial change and the production of urban space. The key argument that I aim to advance is that the BRI despite its variegated expressions across different contexts is deepening social, spatial and environmental inequality across the Global South and North.

In particular, drawing on my empirical research I show that BRI projects in Athens, Colombo, and London exemplify the uneven urban geographies through which the deployment of global infrastructure unfolds leading to the (re)configuration of urban space through the exacerbation of spatial fragmentations

(Wiig and Silver 2019). All projects concentrate activity in urban centres mixing ideas of cosmopolitan metropolises and global, entrepreneurial cities (Jessop 2019; Sassen 2002) with free trade and economic connectivity. This corroborates Castells' (2011) argument about the prevalence of global networks between metropolitan regions with capital, information and technology, as well as elites but not labour, flowing through central urban nodes (Summers 2016). These networks can act as spatial fixes by reducing spatiotemporal barriers, agglomerating (cheap) labour and capital (Hilyard and Sol 2017) and facilitating capital circulation as exemplified by the combination of transportation with real estate and commercial projects in the three cities explored here. Concentrating activities in urban areas consolidates the departure from the spatial Keynesianism of the mid-20th century (Brenner 2004) that was more focused on spatially-balanced development something evident not only in the marginalisation of less connected areas but also in the thriving spatial, social and environmental inequality within the heartlands of capitalist activity. As the tales of Athens, Colombo and London demonstrate inscribing new functions into existing cities or creating new cities has been linked to the creation of new special economic and financial zones, new hubs of global markets and trade, new landscapes of nature's exploitation (Tracy et al. 2017) and new places of workers' precarisation (Hilyard and Sol 2017). The focus on urban nodes and megapolises should not let us lose sight of the profound transformation that rural areas and hinterlands also experience in the BRI context (Williams et al. 2020) due to their transformation into zones of infrastructural equipment, industrial intensification and transnational connectivity (Brenner 2019).

Importantly, the BRI by involving infrastructurally driven, material restructuring of urban space shows that spatial fixes not only transform built environments, spatial forms and social relations but also urban natures (Ekers and Prudham 2017). BRI projects encompassed the intensification of land uses, large-scale infrastructure, residential density, connectivity and social-environmental metabolism, all expressions of what pervades the urban ontologically (Brenner and Schmid 2014; Merrifield 2013). This is emblematically manifested in the creation of a

new city from the ocean in Colombo but is evident in the other two cities too. These transformations have already shown their detrimental effects in Sri Lanka where people's livelihoods have been dependent on marine ecosystems and are currently posing major public health risks in Piraeus raising a wider concern about the BRI's environmental impacts and the way environmental impact assessments are being compiled and approved.

Moreover, and relatedly, BRI's win-win rhetoric may be inclusive for capital but not for people. BRI interventions have in all cases, albeit differently, intertwined with the legacies of urban regeneration, gentrification and displacement. The result has been a consolidation of urban space as an arena for market-oriented economic growth and elite consumption practices, a hallmark of the neoliberal practices that characterised urban regeneration the last two decades (Peck and Tickell 2007) and especially after the 2008 financial crash (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015, 2019; Harvey 2012). This has been evident in cities of the Global North, like Athens and London, where Chinese investment took an upgraded role within a context of prolonged crisis and austerity that deepened urban marginality, signalling a new round of revanchist urban development. It has also been manifested in Colombo testifying the global dimensions of gentrification (López-Morales 2015).

I argue that all the above in their conjunction manifest the aggressive prioritisation of private profits as the key driver of infrastructure development and urban socio-spatial transformation and the consolidation of the decisive influence of corporate interests over the infrastructures of social reproduction signalling the emergence of a new form of *authoritarian neoliberal urbanism* that profoundly transforms the social geography of cities across the Global South and North.

References

Apostolopoulou E Adams WM (2015) Neoliberal Capitalism and Conservation in the Post-crisis Era: The Dialectics of "Green" and "Un-green" Grabbing in Greece and the UK. *Antipode* 47(1):15-35.

- Apostolopoulou E Adams WM (2019) Cutting nature to fit: Urbanization, neoliberalism and biodiversity offsetting in England. *Geoforum* 98:214-225.
- Brenner N (2004) *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brenner N (2019) *New urban spaces: Urban theory and the scale question*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brenner N Schmid C (2014) Planetary urbanization. In: N Brenner (ed) *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (pp. 160-163). Berlin: Jovis.
- Castells M (1977) *The Urban Question: A Marxist approach*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Ekers M Prudham S (2017) The Metabolism of Socioecological Fixes: Capital Switching, Spatial Fixes, and the Production of Nature. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107:1370-1388.
- Harvey D (2012) *Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. Verso books.
- Harvey D (2016) *The Ways of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hildyard N Sol X (2017) *How infrastructure is shaping the world: A critical introduction to infrastructure mega-corridors*. Brussels: Counter Balance.
- Jessop B (2019) [1997]. The entrepreneurial city. In: Jewson N and MacGregor S (eds) *Realising Cities: New Spatial Divisions and Social Transformation* (pp. 28-41). London: Routledge.
- López-Morales E (2015) Gentrification in the global South. *City* 19(4):564-573.
- Merrifield A (2013) The urban question under planetary urbanization. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37:909-922.
- Olinga-Shannon S Barbesgaard M Vervest P (2019) *The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): An AEPF Framing Paper*. Asia Europe People's Forum.

- Peck J Tickell A (2007) Conceptualizing neoliberalism, thinking Thatcherism. In Leitner H Peck J Sheppard ES (eds) *Contesting neoliberalism: Urban frontiers*. Guilford Press.
- Sassen S (2002) Locating cities on global circuits. *Environment and urbanization* 14(1):13-30.
- Summers T (2016) China's 'New Silk Roads': sub-national regions and networks of global political economy. *Third World Quarterly* 37(9):1628-1643.
- Tracy EF Shvarts E Simonov E Babenko M (2017) China's new Eurasian ambitions: The environmental risks of the Silk Road Economic Belt. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58:56-88.
- Wiig A Silver J (2019) Turbulent presents, precarious futures: Urbanization and the deployment of global infrastructure. *Regional Studies* 53(6):912-923.
- Williams J Robinson C Bouzarovski S (2020) China's Belt and Road Initiative and the emerging geographies of global urbanisation. *The Geographical Journal* 186(1):128-140.