Place Branding and the Neoliberal Class Settlement.

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Abstract

Place branding is much more than helping cities become more competitive. It is an aspect of the class settlement in which neoliberalism displaced social democracy. By developing an interdisciplinary political approach it may gain the reflexivity needed to fully understand its role in society. Place branding does not sell places by changing their image, but actively engages in the political transformation of cities as well as displaying many of the assumptions of that settlement which it helps to legitimate. It also creates a consensus in people's minds that obscures neoliberalism's political impacts in shifting power away from ordinary people. By looking at some vignettes of place branding, including London's South Bank, Glasgow, New York, the Great Exhibition and Canary Wharf, it is clear that we should evaluate the impacts of its policies by looking at people not at places; rather than trying to encourage tourism, for instance, we should be asking what different forms of tourism can do for the inhabitants.

Keywords: place branding; Glasgow; The Great Exhibition; Canary Wharf; neoliberalism; consensus.

Introduction

London is one of the most high profile cities in the world and one that is heavily branded, yet in the borough of Westminster, where tourists spend well over £6bn p.a., the official rate of child poverty is 46%, the sixth highest in the country (Greater London Authority, 2011; Stone and Hirsh, 2019). What does this say about place branding?

The principal criterion for selecting an aspect of this activity for further research should be whether one can use it to say something meaningful. In their analysis of how to inject meaning into the social sciences - 'so much noise, so little to say' - Alvesson et al. (2017: 3) argue that systems of meaning are constituted by the prevailing relations of power. Research should address society's political, economic and social relations and it should run counter to the fragmentation of knowledge in which we know more and more about less and less. We should therefore not forget Weber's assertion that social science's central question is 'what shall we do and how shall we live' (Alvesson et al. 2017: 24). In the light of these exhortations, this chapter argues that research should address a more substantial aspect of

place branding, namely its contribution to the construction, reproduction and legitimation of the class settlement that emerged out of the transition from social democracy to neo-liberalism, a transition that is still ongoing, and which has had such an impact on people's lives everywhere.

Place branding does not sell places; it sells political transformation to investors, visitors and residents. It has been involved in this political transition by helping to change the way we conceptualise class relations in order to more easily facilitate the restructuring of the international division of labour. Place branding is part of a process of making places more competitive in the global market by developing narratives that build on a place's uniqueness and authenticity in order to attract inward investment, tourists, students, residents and government funding. On the contrary, the approach adopted in this paper argues that what makes a place competitive is not changing imagery, but what underlies such change, the shift in class relations that allows finance and the owners of property to reshape cities (Harvey 2006: 89). Only by changing class relations is it possible to remove barriers to the profitable accumulation of capital. Place branding is the final stage of a wider sequence of renewal, the aim of which is to change class relations and the perception of them, in order to stimulate the process of accumulation. This sequence starts with introducing entrepreneurial forms of governance and follows with strategies for regeneration.

This shift in perspective means that gentrification, for instance, is more than a welcome inflow of an entrepreneurial middle class that hopefully will improve a city's growth. It is symptomatic of deregulated housing and finance markets that demonstrates the abrogation of the right to democratically control our own lives and abandon the century-old politics of subsidised and secure housing for workers. Exponents of place branding should therefore think carefully before celebrating gentrification. The fashioning of a new image has less to do with attracting certain sectors, than with facilitating a class settlement that shifts the balance of power between labour and capital. Many symptoms of place branding, such as urban tourism, therefore, actively help to encourage and develop these new class relations.

The starting point of this analysis is the fall in the rate of profit and its share of value added in the OECD countries that reached their nadir in the early 1980s (Glyn, 2006; Kliman, 2012). Neoliberalism is the logical response to that crisis (Das, 2017; Mandel, 1975), developing policies over every aspect of society in order to remove the impediments to profitable accumulation that stem from the working class social and political infrastructure (Gough et

al., 2006). This lets the cities free to recapitalise, free from the radicalism associated with the large workforces that characterised the industrial cities.

As the cities started to deindustrialise in the late sixties, the resulting social dislocation led to ever-increasing political demands for the state to meet the needs of the abandoned populations. That in turn generated fiscal crises that social democracy was unable to stem (O'Connor, 1973). Neoliberalism, however, by jettisoning social democracy has developed an urban economy focussing on experiential and intangible goods, with social and political implications that would not have been previously countenanced such as the low wages in the hospitality sector. The class nature of this politics such as deregulating land and labour markets, dismantling democratic local government and reducing local government's financial and political autonomy, attracts investors and knowledge workers. Place branding changes selected city images to demonstrate that they can provide the new middle classes with the services and environment they require. Place branding also introduces various ideological concepts such as the culture of entrepreneurialism, that legitimates the new politics by contrasting it with welfare's alleged culture of dependency.

In this reading, place branding assumes a much greater significance than in conventional analyses because it becomes an active element in changing the balance of institutional class power. Class not imagery explains its rationale. The image, epitomised by the spectacle, is, as Debord (1995) explained, a class relation. The built environment, architecture, aesthetics, design and urban planning express class domination in stone, or as McGuirk (2014: 31) expresses it, 'urbanism is frozen politics'. The spectacle demonstrates how class power is exercised in entrepreneurial cities (Hetherington and Cronin 2008), by associating it with the values of the political settlement and its particular interpretation of society. Since class politics has a low profile, people accept the new social order on the strength of these physical changes – East London's transformation that started with Canary Wharf, for instance, has without doubt helped to create a consensus around neoliberalism (Gough et al., 2006).

Place branding is important because it help solve neoliberalism's dilemma of how to gain legitimacy. Class settlements in a democracy must be consensual rather than imposed, yet how is this possible for a settlement that has created such injustice? This is a question for the politics of knowledge to which place branding contributes – why are social phenomena interpreted in certain ways and not in others? To Rex (1974) social knowledge is distorted so as to mystify power and class relations and hide their negative impacts. Neoliberal society

interprets itself in ways that socialise populations into believing in its consensual and universal nature. By viewing society through the lens of the built environment, place branding tends to obscure neoliberalism's political agenda, and that in turn may accommodate an intensification of class relations without provoking a political reaction. Place branding's concern with consent reflects the turbulent politics that underlies urban regeneration. Baltimore's Harbor Place, for instance, a spectacle of leisure, was explicitly developed to recreate feelings of inclusion in the face of the civic unrest in the 1960s that had been stimulated by the redevelopment of the city centre (Harvey, 1989). Yet that redevelopment, heavily branded, was part of the politics that has effectively juxtaposed a first and fourth world city, two worlds with nothing in common except a class relation.

Place branding has been criticised for its socially regressive impacts and its link to the dominant economic interests (Kavaratzis et al., 2018). The argument here is that not only does it represent these interests, but it also grapples with capitalism's central dilemma, how to preserve the class relations of appropriation while simultaneously meeting popular demands for liberty, democracy and an improved quality of life. One and a half centuries of reform was working towards these demands and had contained radical pressure without diminishing those relations of appropriation, but that contradiction could no longer be contained during the seventies and eighties as capital broke the social contract implicit in the Keynesian welfare state (Streek, 2014). The effect of that action is that capitalism lost its most important means of legitimation, namely democracy. How does one gain mass consent for a class settlement when the dominant politics is primarily concerned with increasing capital's share of GNP and when the democratic deficit is clearly visible? The battle for hearts and minds is now central to the future of many developed countries as the deep fissures in society become increasingly visible.

This is the context for situating place branding – it is part of the revival of economic liberalism yet it is also an activity that encourages consent. It therefore pulls in two directions at once. It makes promises about the possibilities of renewing poorly performing cities, yet it achieves this in ways that remove the protections that shielded residents and workers from the market. It contributes to the revival of disciplinary class relations through what Graham (2011) terms military urbanism, yet it successfully diverts people's attention from this resurgent class politics. Spectacles such as the Olympics, embody this double-edged sword, their popularity facilitating more oppressive changes such as surveillance, that may

encourage further capital inflows into the city. These entanglements make the subject worthy of further research.

Section two examines how place branding legitimates changes in class relations by its influence over our perceptions; and that in turn makes it possible to expand the sphere of accumulation. Section three provides examples of its contribution to the new class settlement.

2. Place marketing and the reproduction of neoliberal values.

The origin of contemporary place marketing is the profits crisis of the 1970s, when capital felt as if its very survival was at stake (Glyn, 2006). The response was a range of class-driven strategies - globalisation, privatisation, and deregulation - aimed at breaking the collective thinking of social democracy and re-establishing capital's hegemony. Place branding not only restructured society's social and political landscape by its actions on class relations, it also changed the ideas we use to explain everyday life. The doctrine of the entrepreneurial city dismisses globalisation as inevitable, but nothing could be further from the truth - its origins lie with pressures to loosen democratic control by the nation state over private property (Slobodian, 2018). Maintaining that control was central to social democratic politics, but neoliberalism's aim to return control to the owners of capital explains its antipathy to democracy. The political difficulties this involves also explains the chasm between the reality and the rhetoric around neoliberalism's policies, and why its defence tends to be couched in abstract rhetorical language (Slobodian, 2018). Place branding similarly justifies its actions in general terms - improving competitiveness - because of the political difficulty of admitting to, or even recognising, neoliberalism's own class analysis.

This attitude explains why the profession does not offer evidence for the impact of branded cities on quality of life indicators such as income and wealth distribution, social mobility, or life chances. The practitioners' agenda is concerned primarily with effectiveness of its own aims – how can we best market the cities and improve their competitive position? Place branding aims to attract money to the city, yet one cannot assume that this will improve people's lives. For that reason we should be asking more questions. Which groups should benefit? Where do the additional revenues go? How much money leaks away to other locations, how much goes to property owners in higher rents, how much to shop assistants? Who benefits from tourism and who pays? Do the post-industrial sectors benefit the vulnerable? How could cities illustrate the social and political alternatives that have been

experimented with in the last four decades of urban policy in Britain, such as the social economy (Amin, 2009)? These are questions for further research.

Ironically, while the argument here is for prioritising a class analysis, place branding's narrative depoliticises the last five decades of urban history by omitting a political analysis of urban problems. De-industrialisation is presented as a fact of nature rather than an explicit political choice that was designed to reduce both production costs and the power of the unions. Capital's return to the city is also presented in a consensus framework as beneficial to its populations. Yet underlying place branding's appearances is a highly political model that demonises social democracy for its economic naivety, that asserts the effectiveness of markets in restoring cities to their former wealth, yet which offers no protection to the those facing housing problems and that creates a class of rentiers that live off the enhanced land values that branding creates (Harvey, 2012.**)**.

Place branding's conventional narrative projects neoliberalism's key assumptions and presents a provocative model of politics as common sense so as to change how populations are socialised. The regeneration agenda articulates the values of this class settlement so that the built environment projects a particular interpretation of social reality which is read and accepted. Place branding accordingly projects neoliberal assumptions and confirms the dominant narrative of a knowledge-based globalisation (Thompson, 2014) in which the cities must be restructured for the professionals associated with the post-industrial and consumer service economy. Cities obscure the class realities of this politics.

The combination of entrepreneurialism, regeneration and place marketing makes a powerful narrative because it introduces politics in non-threatening ways. It uses keywords such as creative cities, business-friendly politics, gentrification, culture, competitiveness, trickle-down and civil society to portray a new start for problem cities. These keywords are presented as a linked set of assumptions that re-conceptualises relations between state, individual, civil society, markets and class in order to justify the new class settlement. Hence growth depends on low taxes, the economy is to be prioritised over welfare, welfare is a cost to society, subsistence goods should be supplied privately not collectively, trade unions should be excluded from participation in governance, and enterprise and self-help are beneficial values for people and places. The practice of place branding repeats these fundamental neoliberal ideas and, by combining them with the spectacle's visual stimulus, demonstrates their truth (Eisenschitz, 2018).

The spectacle gives neoliberalism a benign image because it overshadows class. Dubai, for instance, owes everything to class relations: the semi-slaves that build it, the absence of citizenship among most of the population and its existence as the ruling family's private fiefdom (Davis, 2006). It illustrates a simple truth about place branding, that it is most effective in places where key markets - land, property, labour and finance – are unregulated and where it can present the spectacle of tourist utopias with no hint of the political relationships underpinning it. Dubai, Glasgow, Prague and even London's Docklands are presented as free from the restrictive politics of the past and islands of consumption, freedom and consent. Yet they rest upon a divisive and invisible, neoliberal politics. As Monbiot (2016) notes, neoliberalism is almost invisible in Britain despite being the ruling politics – place marketing demonstrates the truth of that statement in supporting an interpretation of a convincingly apolitical world.

3. Place branding in practice.

Place branding refracts the abstractions of neoliberalism through the lens of the physical so that physical symbols overshadow and obscure its class politics. Glasgow's time as European City of Culture in 1990, transformed its image from razor gangs, unemployment and alcoholism to a celebration of design, architecture, culture and retail (Garcia, 2004). The event was, however, more significant for the defeat of the traditional socialist establishment (McLay, 1990), a defeat that saw local and central government subsequently ignore the severe structural issues that make it Britain's most deprived locality (Mooney, 2004), in their aim to facilitate Glasgow's post-industrial path as a leisure destination. While the image helps to construct political consent, one must not forget the iron fist that preceded this velvet glove, the human costs of its economic collapse and the political marginalisation of those affected. Glasgow's heavily subsidised development of the leisure economy was the result of deliberate class politics: new investment targeted to the surrounding areas, a democratic deficit, a poor physical environment, the transfer of the Council's housing stock to the housing associations and the encouragement of a tourism sector with a low wage, non-unionised workforce. The result is a premature mortality rate 30% higher than cities in England and Wales with similar levels of deprivation (Walsh et al., 2016). Old industrial cities that have found a future in tourism have discovered that not only do the new jobs not compensate for those that were lost, but that they tend to have a polarised income distribution and a declining middle class (Guilluy, 2017).

Canary Wharf provides another example of the power of the spectacle in changing class politics through its impact upon perceptions. It was the centrepiece of Mrs Thatcher's claims that markets could overcome socialism's stifling impact upon human potential and economic development, audaciously built in the heartland of British socialism. Place branding depends upon the proposition that the real is rational; a building's physical presence tends to reinforce the politics that it embodies. The Enterprise Zone in which Canary Wharf was located was designed to show how Hong Kong style liberalisation could transform Britain's poorest areas, while simultaneously making a statement about the failure of political democracy, welfare, local government and the public ownership of land. Regeneration simply required the liberation of the market. Canary Wharf's very existence demonstrates the truth of these statements. Yet this is rhetoric. London Dockland's success depended on a moment of raw political power, in which central government transferred public land and planning policy to the private sector by stripping local government of its democratic powers and spending billions on business-supporting infrastructure. Place branding is essential to making the cities attractive to capital and influencing public perceptions of that process (Bird, 2000).

Neoliberal politics helped clear the cities of manufacturing by facilitating the movement of capital overseas and opening them to the production of experiential goods that are less prone to unionisation. To attract visitors cities must capture and market a place's symbolic capital, which as Harvey (2012) points out is collective and an externality. The art of place branding is to ensure that these externalities – a place's unique culture, history, art, architecture, atmosphere, people – are transformed into private gain. This is the equivalent of privatising the commons. Creating imagery around the location lets it be priced into the goods that are sold there, whether that is retail, tourism or property, with the ultimate aim of raising land values and rents.

This material – Glasgow's cultural assets and working class history, Birmingham's canals, Liverpool's music and cobbles, London's domestic Georgian houses, its Cockney culture – is sanitised, packaged, and interpreted in ways that maximise rents. The beneficiaries are developers, housebuilders, landlords, hotels, tourist attractions, business services and retailers, all of whom extract that rent from their customers. These newly commodified externalities are sold to those able to afford them, the process of gentrification. Positive externalities are portrayed as universally good for everyone, overlooking the impact on vulnerable groups that are often forced to relocate in what is sometimes termed social cleansing. All this may occur only once neoliberal class relations have restructured the

institutions that organise the urban environment. For example, the recent public investment and community building undertaken by London's great estates such as Howard de Walden in Marylebone or Chelsea's Cadogan estate are successful instances of branding (NLA, 2013) as a means of increasing the rent roll.

Place branding advertises consensus by asserting that its strategies provide universal benefits. New Orleans uses ethnic diversity to proclaim such universality. Afro-American New Orleans is a commercialised, branded spectacle open to all and constructed around the cultural externalities of food, music and history (Gotham, 2007). Yet the universal promises displayed to tourists contrasts with the deep-seated exclusion endemic to Afro-Americans. This group, already marginalised in the tourism economy, was prevented from returning to the city after Hurricane Katrina as investment was directed to the central area and the white suburbs (Boyer, 2014).

By stressing universality, spectacles dampen social instability. That grandfather of place marketing, The Great Exhibition in Hyde Park successfully obscured the turbulence of 1848, the first global resistance to the capitalist order (Saville, 1987). It was visited by one third of the country's population, becoming an enduring signifier of modernity, the capitalist social order, economic liberalism and the freedoms of empire. Spectacles like that symbolically articulate ideas of a consensual future by breaking down feelings of 'them and us'. The 2012 Olympics illustrated an entrepreneurial city engaging with the politics of city branding to promise to raise local residents' socio-economic wellbeing to the London average. Yet like all mega-events implemented within a neoliberal polity, its spatial, social, economic and political impacts rarely impact positively on vulnerable communities (Weber-Newth et al., 2017). Not only do they encourage the process of accumulation by dispossession, they are part of a narrative around the regulation and management of 'problem' people and 'problem' places, that present a normative model of consumer-citizenship, that has become an updated variant of blaming the poor for their condition (Paton et al, 2014). As these authors argue, this interpretation curtails a more collective interpretation of the causes of and possibilities that have arisen out of de-industrialisation. Mega-events must therefore be seen as powerful agents for socialising working class populations.

The spectacle is a means used by all political interests to legitimate themselves. London's South Bank illustrates how conflict over land use is ultimately a conflict over class. Part of the area had been the site of the Festival of Britain in 1951, a spectacle aimed at consolidating

the Labour government's politics, but its symbolic impact had been so powerful that Churchill's first action as incoming prime minister, was to tear the site down. Land use determination in the area remained highly political. Further commercial development had been resisted by an alliance of unions, the community and local government, as illustrated in the 1980s by a community group gaining a major site, Coin Street, after a lengthy court battle. That victory, however, could not be consolidated. Central government intervention had so impoverished the local authorities that the group was forced to join the local regeneration partnerships in order to finance its development plan and that meant suppressing its more radical aims. These partnerships are power brokers representing major interest groups such as the London Tourist Board, Transport for London and local employers, and have access to finance as well as the ear of central government.

Such private public partnerships at arms-length to the state, classically use place branding to facilitate commercial regeneration and prevent more prime sites falling into working class hands (Baeten, 2000). Yet they also depoliticise the development process by normalising the primacy of market forces in the land market. This consensus, however, has been imposed by force since it involved central government's victory over local government's ability to raise money and the abolition of the first tier of London Government in 1986. In order to symbolise abolition, its headquarters, County Hall, was sold and developed for the tourist industry. Yet as neoliberalism's political power consolidated, place branding managed to hide a class-based interpretation of urban change and presents a political consensus that shows how it has contributed to the creation of an inclusive festival area, a mix of culture and entertainment illustrated by the London Eye and Tate Britain.

These examples illustrate how an interpretation around class relations differs from a conventional approach to understanding place branding. A final instance sees New York's place branding campaign as central to its economic renewal since the dark days of the early 1970s (Bendel, 2011). Harvey (2005) on the other hand takes a class perspective in which he attributes the revival of the city's fortunes to the coup staged by the banks to push the city into bankruptcy. They used their financial leverage to pay off the bondholders and slash the living standards of its working class residents, stripping the city government and the unions of much of their powers. The elite subsequently restructured the institutions of governance, replacing democracy with entrepreneurialism, subsidising an infrastructure for business, renewing the economy around finance, law, media and cultural production, and encouraging a consumer economy, gentrification and neighbourhood revival. The famous place branding

campaign was just one aspect of this process but ideologically it was significant because it obscured this wider political context. If, as these vignettes demonstrate, a symbolic urban politics helps construct the new class settlement, then this opens new areas of research for place branding.

Conclusion

We may draw four conclusions to inform further research. First if ever there was an activity requiring an inter-disciplinary approach it is place branding. Its origins and impacts relate to so many aspects of society - socialisation and political legitimation, the development of class relations and political action, attitudes to production and consumption, interpretations of social inclusion and exclusion and the legitimation of gentrification and tourism – that one cannot treat it as an activity that simply attracts economic activity to a locality. Second, the distinction between academics and practitioners should be upheld, since the former are not constrained by the job and are therefore able to explore frameworks that transcend the activity's common-sense assumptions and assertions. However much academic work is to support practitioners in being more effective in their limited aims. Third, academics should be aware of and test these hidden assertions. What are the implications of developing policy for regeneration for, rather than with, the politically powerless? Is place branding really apolitical? What is the latent politics associated with the notion of the creative city (Peck, 2005)? Does improving a local economy improve the quality of life of local populations? Questioning place branding's beliefs will encourage the development of more criteria to assess it other than job creation or economic growth. Fourth, one must develop the range of explanations and interpretations of place branding in various paradigms rather than accepting the dominant one.

A typical comment summarises the profession's dilemmas. Hospers (2004) argues that Glasgow's strategy for arts and culture failed to recognise that the residents' history was rooted in class struggle and municipal socialism. His solution is to seek a consensus between people, the political and economic institutions, the local economy, cultural bodies and education. Yet by assuming that consensus is possible, he avoids confronting the possibility that this failure is not a mistake, but instead reflects real power relations. If that is so then the expectation of finding consensus should be critically examined – is consent possible, or is it part of neoliberal rhetoric that distracts from urban and social conflict? One should instead investigate why that strategy took the form it did and relate it to Glasgow's urban politics. An

interdisciplinary framework would show how the organisation of urban space expresses political argument and that the reasons for image manipulation lie in the connections between material, symbolic and political conflicts. Rather than simply finding solutions within a narrow paradigm, research into place branding should be reflexive in order to develop critical interpretations of its own practice and ultimately to inform its future.

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