

Dr. Timothy Weaver, Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Louisville, the Keynote Speaker at the UWM Urban Studies Programs 21st Annual Student Research Forum 2016.

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Ditimoni Baruah (DB): Thank you for this interview! It's such a great opportunity for us to have you here today for the USP Student Forum. So, because you have studied in the UK and then you also studied in the US, can you just brief us about your education in the UK and then why particularly you are interested in Urban Studies?

Timothy Weaver (TW): Yes, so I did my undergrad degree in Philosophy and Politics in the UK in a University called Durham University, which is in the Northeast, and it's sort of one of the key universities that you go to if you don't get into Oxford or Cambridge...And I then was thinking about doing further studies and the senior teacher at my college said, having done something similar herself, that I should consider studying in the US for graduate school. So I ended up coming to UPenn in Philadelphia for a one-year Master's. I was primarily focused on international relations and the plan originally was for me to go back and work in the foreign office having done some study abroad. But I ended up staying in the US and doing a PhD. And I took a class with Adolf Reed, who works on black politics and race and class and these issues.

He kind of reminded me about why I cared about politics in the first place. And so, I took Urban Politics with him and ended up shifting my focus to Urban Politics.

DB: Why is urban scholarship important to you?

TW: Well, I think the urban scale is where so much political conflict becomes concrete. So for me, it provides a sort of analytical window into how ideas, institutions, interests, actually play out in the real world in a tangible way. And, I think that the *urban* helps to provide an insight into some of the deepest contradictions in political and economic development. So it's often the place where you have the highest generations of wealth, and the highest concentrations of poverty. It's the place in which you see conflicts over land use, over race, over schooling, right? So it seems to me a perfect vantage point to look in and to get a concrete sense of political conflict and political change...One of the things I do in teaching Urban Politics is to really highlight the degree to which conflict is kind of at the essence of urban politics because people don't win, sometimes people lose.

DB: What are the current projects you are doing and how do they relate to your research in Urban Studies?

TW: So, I am working on a couple of different projects. At the moment, I am working on an edited book volume with Richardson Dilworth of Drexel University, and it kind of comes out of the research I did in this book. One of the things I emphasize in the book is the role of ideas. And in political science, where I come from...there tends to be less emphasis on the role of ideas and more on institutions or on organized interests. And so our book project is all about the role of ideas in urban political development...Then I just published something on the urban crisis-a

genealogy of the urban crisis and the way that...different characterizations about what the urban crisis is, have played out overtime in the US context to provide justifications for various political projects such as targeting welfare...A project that's sort of in its infancy is on the privatization of public space, calling it the New Enclosures, the various ways in which the public realm is being closed in various forms, via literally through gated communities, or in more subtle ways through the rise of, for example, privately owned public spaces....and then even more subtly then that, the renaming and the rebranding of public institutions, or institutions that have a public dimension. So, sports teams, sports stadiums. In Philadelphia, there's even a station now that's being renamed the AT&T station. It's still publicly owned, but I worry that it undermines the idea that there is a public realm that's worth defending and advancing.

DB: How do you define neoliberalism and why do you think it's important for the city as well as for the people to understand what it is?

TW: My definition of neoliberalism is influenced by (David Harvey) because he provides a nice definition in *The Brief History of Neoliberalism*. I argue that it's a set of ideas, a rhetorical framework, a political strategy, which argues that freedom, justice, and well-being are best guaranteed by the state advancing private property, free markets. It privileges financial capital over other forms of capital. And so what I'm interested in doing in my definition is to show how it's committed to the use of the State to guarantee competition and privatization and so on and so forth. Its practical effects are trying to reduce the fetters on capital movement and using the State to change the rules of the game in ways that help build capital. So the state for me is very much central...one of the things that I look at in my book "*Blazing the Neoliberal Trail: Urban Political Development in the United States and the United Kingdom*" (2015), is the way in which

the state, rather than being pushed by business interests, is actually taking the lead and sometimes bringing along business interests. So, there's a big question about whether neoliberalism is simply about capital getting its way, and my argument is that capital is the main beneficiary of neoliberalization, but that the state is a key agent in making changes which sometimes were not originally demanded by capital.

On the propagation of neoliberalism.

I think what you have is a situation where neoliberal ideologues come to power in the 1970s and 80s in a period where liberalism, sort of New Deal liberalism or what was known as the Post War Settlement in Britain, social democracy, became discredited. So, there was a great deal of uncertainty about what to do next. There was even uncertainty among businesses, and business organizations. While they all wanted to make a profit, it wasn't clear exactly what the best means to do that was, and what the State should do to advance that interest. So, this provided an opening for people who had a very particular view...and so what you have then is these ideologues being able to harness the power of central State institutions to bring forth neoliberal policy designs. And then you have capital which is funding organizations like think tanks and political campaigns and so on which then keeps it going. Then you have, in Britain and the US at least...parties of the center left who keep losing in the 1980s, particularly at the national level, and executive, the presidential elections in America, and in general the elections in Britain, and they begin to adjust towards neoliberalism. So, they begin, for example, to emphasize tackling inflation rather than employment as a priority. They begin to accept lower taxes on the wealthy. They begin to reject redistribution approaches. They don't think that government intervention in planning is appropriate...if you think about what's happened with deindustrialization and the tax

on the labor unions, the balance between labor and capital shifts over the course of the second half of the 20th century, and when parties of the center left came into power...they did very little to reverse that shift. In fact, it seems they felt quite comfortable running against the left of their respective parties. And so I think the way neoliberalism got consolidated was when parties of the center left accepted some of its key tenets. It's not that they necessarily were out and out neoliberals like Thatcher and Reagan, but rather they thought that "Yes, the world had changed," simply that there's no real alternative, so what you should do is try and make the best of it. And that's a generous reading.

On the neoliberal cycle continuing...

I think that the great tragedy for those of us who don't like neoliberalism is that the global financial crisis, should have provided, or could have provided...an opportunity for an alternative, but institutions of the left were so depleted—organizationally, institutionally, and parties of the left had become so accustomed to neoliberalism, that there hadn't been the work in the 1980s and '90s and 2000s to prepare for an alternative. The neoliberals had been working away for decades, and they took their chance. There wasn't an equivalent. And people were at a loss for what to do because they had almost accepted there was no alternative. And so it still is very much with us.

DB: How do you relate work in academia with neoliberalism?

TW: It kind of depends on the field. In a field like geography, it seems like everyone is talking about neoliberalism—it's just part of the language. So, what I've been writing in my book and my characterization about what happened would probably not be a big shock to geographers. In

political science and people that study American politics within political science, no one uses the term neoliberalism, or almost no one. And it's fascinating, really. Paul Pierson and Jacob Hacker have just written a book about what they called the “winner take all economy,” which is all about the explosion of inequality in America. But they don't use the word neoliberalism, at all, in the whole book—even though they are describing the emergence of neoliberalism...people do want to characterize it in their own terms. I think people are worried that if they're going to be taken seriously by their centrist colleagues, that if they use neoliberalism, that they might make it more difficult...Once you realize that neoliberalism is different from conservatism, and that the Republican party is a coalition of conservatives and neoliberals, and that Democrats are really a coalition of liberals and neoliberals, than it's no surprise that you might see Democrats and Republicans doing the same thing. And neoliberalism, I think, helps give us a conceptual framework to make order out of that apparent chaos.

DB: What is the way forward? What's going to happen next under the shadow of neoliberalism?

TW: Well, that's the big question. Unless people try more radical alternatives, I think what we'll see, is that even with the return of economic growth, that growth will continue to be captured in fewer and fewer hands. You know we have a shift whereby, even though employment is rising, or unemployment is falling, we still see these persistently high rates of poverty. We still see urban dilapidation; you see that throughout every American city. You have big swaths of the city that have been abandoned, or that look like they've been abandoned. But there's still a lot of wealth circulating around. You know, GDP per capita, I think it's right to say, is higher than ever! And so there's something wrong with the way wealth is being generated, the way it's being

distributed, and that unless more radical alternatives are forged, what we'll see even with an economic recovery, which is good news, is that cities will still remain places of great inequality. We seem to be switching back to the same modes of the 1990s and the 2000s. Unless we come up with an alternative that's not about tinkering at the edges, we're not really going to get a socially just city, or a socially just world. And I think that's regrettable, but coming up with an alternative is not easy.

DB: So, Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the US. How do you think the rise of neoliberalism is going to affect the city?

TW: Well I think what we see is sort of segregation along class lines and across racial lines. It's quite tricky to separate the two, not least because so many African Americans are working class and poorer. And so, when we look at the city and we count segregation by race, then we're going to see segregation by race, and in fact we do. But we also see segregation by class. And neoliberalism is going to reinforce those trends. I guess there's a standard view that segregation in all its forms is a bad thing, and integration in all its forms is a good thing. And I think it's more complicated than that. I think what's more important than having the right combination of people of different races in one place, or people of different classes in one place, what's most important, is to make each of those places decent places to live—decent public services, decent housing, decent schools. And then if people want to move around and circulate, then that's great...but the tendency to assume that the poverty stricken black family will have a different life and a better life if they live next to a rich white family is simplistic, and forgets the way in which poverty is produced and reproduced in the first place. And so, the sort of moving-to-opportunity type approach to dealing with segregation is deeply problematic, and what we should be doing

instead is to think about how we create viable, attractive, and secure places, economically and physically secure. Because in the end, shuffling people around isn't going to solve the problem...I think we need to focus on people having decent jobs, decent public services, decent schools, in places where people live right now...that's not to say exclusion based on race is acceptable. It is true, that historically, one of the reasons why more wealthy African Americans didn't move to the suburbs is because racist institutions prevented them from doing so. That is a fact, and I don't want to be doubtful about that at all. But that fact does not change the reality that a solution that simply shuffles people around is not a solution to the problem of poverty and injustice in the city.

DB: Do you have any suggestions to students that are researching the rise of neoliberalism?

TW: It's happening in lots of domains, and there's a tremendous amount of research to be done. One thing that I'm interested in doing more of is thinking about alternatives. I would encourage students to engage in the critique, but it seems to be the big task is to think about how can we do something differently... how can we do something better?

DB: I think we have to stop here. Thank you for your time!