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Encountering austerity in everyday life: Intensities, localities, materialities

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Austerity: More than a failed promise

Most of our students have spent their adolescence living austerity, but many have never heard of it; few recognise the social and economic conditions that preceded the financial crisis or how they have transformed in the years that followed. This is not a surprise. Austerity has lost its sheen as a galvanising promise, and for now in the UK, the effects of cuts are crowded conveniently out by the obnoxious clatter of 'Brexit.' Yet, this absent-presence tells us something about the kind of *thing* austerity is. Austerity continues on, even as 'it' is no longer 'owned.' Austerity becomes a set of ideologies, neoliberal strategies, discourses, and takes form in everyday objects, relationships, places, and feelings. Austerity, as we discuss it here, becomes a series of evolving social, cultural and economic forces that are felt, that are not always linear, or coherent, that include but also exceed political distortions and obfuscations. Perhaps then, this makes some sense of our students' absent-present relationships with austerity and the extent to which its dominant logics are internalised by them as common sense. There is hope in this diagnosis too; if austerity is a series of social, cultural and economic forces that are lived and felt, then scholars, activists, artists, journalists, residents, citizens, community influencers who write about, research, and facilitate activism in relation to the (more-than) shrinking state can also affect the sort of *thing* that austerity is – they can impact on how and what austerity becomes.

Despite gestures to the 'end of austerity' by UK chancellor Phillip Hammond in 2018, the effects of cuts and reforms will roll on, often hidden beneath the skin of political and cultural

life; obscured, disorientated and disorientating. Looking at the so-called ends of austerity, and what ends in austerity (Raynor, 2018) shows how it takes its shape. Privatised services are not returned to public hands by the naming of an end; dismantled social protections are not re-assembled by the naming of an end; people, homes and neighbourhoods that are lost or broken, are not fixed by the naming of an end. As this special issue demonstrates, austerity continues to become present in the fabric and structures of public, voluntary and private sector organisations; in the shifting shapes of towns, cities, streets and homes; and in everyday relationships, atmospheres and emotions. And as long as austerity continues to be endured, we must continue to expose it, in part by holding the engineers of austerity – as a series of economic reforms – to account for the lives, the hopes, the spaces and communities that are stressed; and in part by showing and, when necessary, contesting how austere logics take-on multiple lives of their own.

Some ten years from the onset of austerity, the UK and Ireland are in different but related states of acute political and social change. The referendum to exit the European Union has intensified turbulence in mainstream political parties, everyday racial violence has increased (Travis, 2016) and Scotland looks towards independence. Nascent research has begun to evoke the centrality of austerity in relation to these processes of upheaval (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Fetzer, 2018). In this special issue, understanding austerity as something that continues to emerge as it is lived means exploring how it becomes part of the experiences, activities and encounters that constitute life-worlds (Stewart, 2011) in dissonant and causally complicated ways. For example, whilst great attention has been given to austerity as the ideological *shrinkage* of the state (Grey and Barford, 2018) the case of disability welfare reform shows an extension of punitive policies that do *not* necessarily save public funds (Office for Budget Responsibility, reported by Inman, 2019) and that make the disciplinary state increasingly present for bodies who must encounter regular and hostile assessment. These contradictions become part of the thing 'austerity' is.

Austerity therefore, is a diffuse and extended event, it is not fixed, but in a constant state of emergence: felt and lived above and beneath the surface in everyday life. Vocabularies are provided in this special issue for understanding the often-contradictory emergences of austerity, organised via 'intensities, localities and materialities.' These papers do not always make order from the confusion of austerity that are an inevitable result of its multiplicity, but

also work *with* this confusion: they highlight how varied experiences coexist in tension with one another and become part of austerity-lived. Therefore, this issue builds on early interventions into the everyday lives of austerity (Hall, 2016; Hitchen, 2016; Horton, 2016; Jupp, 2016; Raynor, 2017) to account for a lived phenomenon that seeps ever further, and often intangibly, into the nooks and crannies of space and time.

The changing discourse(s) of austerity

In order to think more about different constitutes of austerity (and relations between them) let us focus now on austerity as discourse. The United Kingdom has been in a state of austerity since 2010, and Ireland some two years prior to that. In the UK a private sector banking crisis (2008-2009) was rechristened by political and financial elites as a crisis of the sovereign state (Blyth, 2013). The Conservative Party and Liberal Democrat coalition government's relentless repetition of the UK's 'record deficit' (Osborne, 2010a) rendered national debt a matter of immediate concern. Not only was the notion of a 'debt crisis' performed, but deficit reduction was rendered 'the most urgent issue facing Britain' (HM Government, 2010, p. 15). This was a neat reversal: it was claimed that suffering would not be a consequence of austerity measures, but would arise if such measures were avoided (Clarke and Newman, 2012). Both the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osbourne constructed a catastrophic vision of the UK's economic future if the deficit reduction plan was not followed:

> *"Imagine if I was to actually stand up on Budget Day and say I'm abandoning the plan – if I said that we're not going to tackle the deficit. Now imagine the reaction. The panic in the markets. The credit rating downgraded. And yes, the sky high market interest rates. Think what that would bring. The investment cancelled. The businesses destroyed. The jobs lost.* (Osborne, 2011a)

Cameron and Osborne stressed that if the deficit was not reduced, confidence in Britain's economy would plummet, leading to higher interest rates and less investment; this would result in an economic decline, rather than recovery. The repeated warnings of the 'devastating' consequences of not 'dealing' with the deficit were enough to turn them into empirical 'fact.' For Cameron (2010) not adhering to the deficit reduction plan would result in a "steady, painful erosion of confidence in our economy" in which "Britain's economy would

begin an inevitable slide into decline." [1] Importantly, here, Cameron indicates a slow burn condition – the drawn out, agonising death of the economy, which ultimately means more pain for individual bodies than an abrupt, temporary sting. The slow death of the economy is placed in a binary with the supposedly short sharp time geography of the deficit reduction plan. [2]

It is well rehearsed that the uneven localities of austerity have proved counter to the dominant narrative of the time. However, the extended time-spaces of austerity have also proved counter to the (often forgotten) 'short sharp pain' narrated at its birth. Austerity was constructed as urgent and necessary. Folded into the discourse of austerity as necessity was the little contested notion of 'irresponsible spending' by the preceding Labour government:

> *["M]uch of the deficit is structural. A problem built up before the recession, caused by government spending and planning to spend more than we could afford. It had nothing to do with the recession. And so growth will not sort it out."* (Cameron, 2010)

This constructed the position that the "[t]he country has overspent" and "has not been under-taxed" (Osborne, 2010b). Affordability was used as a justification to shrink the welfare state (Peck 2012, Hamnet, 2013). George Osborne targeted £83 billion worth of savings in the public sector by 2014-2015, claiming that austerity would be complete by the end of the five-year parliament (Curtis, 2010). Yet, as we now are all too aware, spending reductions have been persistent and on-going well beyond 2015, carried forward by successive Conservative

[1] The repetition of the 'disastrous' consequences of not acting upon the deficit include:

"There are some political opponents who claim that in setting out our decisive plans to deal with the deficit we have taken a gamble with Britain's economy. In fact the reverse is true. The gamble would have been not to act, to put Britain's reputation at risk and to leave the stability of the economy to the vagaries of the bond market, assuming investors around the world would continue to tolerate the largest budget deficit in the G20. The actions we took in the Budget have removed the biggest downside risk to the recovery – a loss of confidence and a sharp rise in market interest rates. Britain now has a credible plan to deal with our record deficit. We must stick by it. To budge from that plan would risk reigniting the markets' suspicions that Britain does not have the will to pay her way in the world." (Osborne, 2010c)

"So, why do we have to sort out the public finances? Quite simply – because we have to. Because any other road leads to ruin. If we don't get a grip on government spending, there will be no growth." (Osborne, 2010d)

[2] It is worth noting the *feelings* of confidence, of risk, of fear, of pain, that are constituted and galvanised in these discourses and positioning them against the framing of fiscal catastrophe deployed by the remain campaign in the build up to Brexit – on the one hand - this makes some sense of the public's distrust of calls towards economic catastrophe, lack of investment, down-graded credit ratings and so on. On the other hand we see how the 'short sharp pain' for long-term gain was successfully deployed – again - by the leave campaign.

administrations. For Keynesian critics who highlight the inherent failures of austerity, this is far from surprising (see Blyth, 2013; Krugman, 2012; Quiggin, 2012).

For the Coalition government this sharp reduction in budget would be an act of 'collective pain sharing':

> *"[W]e will do everything, work with anyone, overcome every obstacle in our path to jobs and prosperity. So that together we will ride out the storm"* (Osborne, 2011b).

Yet as we became quickly aware, the pain of austerity has not been felt universally. Particular parts of government spending have been disproportionately targeted for budget reduction – including the welfare state and local government (Grey and Barford, 2018). In this way, austerity hit supposedly 'irresponsible' bodies, bodies rendered irresponsible, and untrustworthy, amidst a culture of suspicion and hostility; claimants of housing and employment benefits, single mothers on social security, 'the shirkers' who were pitted in opposition to 'the workers' (Slater, 2014; Jenson and Tyler, 2015). This legitimated an uneven distribution of spending reductions that claimed to not only to "[s]cale back the waste of the state" (Pickles, 2011) but to fix and redress the mythical injustices of a 'broken,' fiscally and morally undisciplined Britain (Slater, 2014). Constitutions of the undeserving poor reached across a range of social, political and cultural platforms, including genres of television programming such as 'poverty porn' (Jenson and Tyler, 2015). Sticky atmospheres of irresponsibility failed to address the complexities of social and economic disadvantage; the burden of responsibility for the fiscal deficit was born by already marginalised bodies and places; and the majority of the cuts continue to be shouldered by those same bodies and places.

Following the damning UN report on extreme poverty and human rights in an austere UK (Phillips, 2018) it is imperative to revisit these discourses now. Numerous crises unfold as a result of austerity, such as the crisis of adult social care, the crisis of local councils, the knife crime crisis, crisis in children and adolescent mental health; yet, at the time, the sense that the state (or more specifically the Labour government) had overspent was so undisputable, that it dampened any Keynesian response, or other progressive responses to debt reduction. This is not to suggest that austerity as a discursive construction is singular, far from it. Rebecca Bramall (2013), for example, examines the emergence of an austerity discourse that was based upon frugality and sustainable consumption – an eco-austerity that pushed forward an anti-consumerist politics. As argued by Jensen (2016: 523), whilst the cultural

politics of austerity is complex and multiple, not all discourses of austerity hold equal weight: there was a clear hegemonic version of austerity that could not be neutered by alternative or radical counter-discourses. It seems clear then that the dominance of austerity as spending reduction and as a legitimate and urgent response to the 'debt crisis' held much greater weight than more progressive accounts of austerity and more progressive responses to public debt. However, we should be cautious about fully *separating* the affective lives of these apparently opposing austerity discourses, since central to both is a desire and a promise for removal of 'excess' and 'excessive life': genuinely, or not, both are *built* around notions of protection and investment for future generations (Raynor, 2017).

We see then how understanding austerity as a set of discourses (with complex and entangled emotional undercurrents) matters precisely because this paved the way for reductions to be implemented across state spending, but in particular on the welfare state and local government. The discourses of austerity as an unavoidable necessity *legitimated* the implementation of spending reductions, providing the conditions for austerity to materialise in everyday life. It is necessary then, to hold present and make visible the discursive scaffolding of austerity, and in doing so continue to shift public moods that were galvanised by promises of austerity from the outset: to reveal the extent to which these promises have failed to be realised. Of course, this work is already being done successfully, now, in the UK. It is hard to deny the violence of austerity in the contemporary; hence the silence; hence the naming of an end. Yet as we know, such silence and such naming accompanies and contributes to the on-going violence of austerity. This seeks to disable opportunity for subversion and resistance. The material lives of austerity cannot be resisted if austerity – as discourse – no longer exists. As we will see in this special issue, the logics of austerity have become embedded in public, third, and private sector institutions, in neighbourhoods and homes; austerity as discourse must not be allowed to disappear but instead stuck to those logics. Its falsehoods, violence and failings must be continually, relentlessly, exposed.

Austerity has lived consequences: Intensities, localities, materialities

Despite gestures towards the naming of the end, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has calculated that governmental departmental spending per person is continuing to fall in real terms. In 2009-10 departmental spending was equivalent to £6,460 per person. This fell to £5,460 in 2016-17 and is forecast to fall to £5,370 per person in 2019-20 (Emmerson, 2017). These

spending reductions have not been evenly distributed across departmental sectors, and their impacts are unevenly distributed too. As we have touched upon, welfare and service cuts target already marginalised groups (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2013) and exacerbate divides of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability at a local, regional and global level (Brah, Szemen and Gedalof, 2015; Beatty and Fothergill, 2015). Women and especially women of colour have been disproportionately affected (Karamessini and Rubrey, 2014; Jupp, 2016; Women's Budget Group, and the Runnymede Trust 2017).

The Department for Communities and Local Government have seen deep and on-going spending reductions since 2010. An analysis by the National Audit Office stated that grants to local councils reduced, on average, by 49.1 percent in real terms over the period between 2010-2011 to 2017-2018, making local authorities the most squeezed of all areas of state activity under the austerity programme (Chu, 2018). This too has been unevenly distributed across the UK, with the deepest cuts to local spending in post-industrial cities in the North of England (Gray and Barford, 2018) set to continue for the foreseeable future. The central government funded Revenue Support Grant that supports local authorities will be completely eliminated by 2020. Funding between 2015-2016 and 2019-20 has dropped from £9,927 million to £2,284 million, with almost half of local authorities (168 of all local authorities) receiving no government funding, as they are expected to be self-sufficient (Bulman, 2018). As such, between 2019 and 2020, UK local authorities face the largest amount of spending cuts since 2010, with a 36 percent reduction in expenditure (ibid.). This shift towards the localisation of economic responsibility pays little heed to the industrial and de-industrial histories that impact on regions' capacities for income generation, or to the unequal distribution of wealth and need (Beatty and Fothergill 2017).

As this special issue reveals, these cuts are lived and felt in specific ways by individuals and groups of individuals across the UK and Ireland. Local authorities are responsible for the provision of many services, including public libraries, swimming pools, community centres, street-lights, road maintenance and adult social care. Lived austerity is becoming more and more significant, not only as budgets continue to be slashed, but also as effects extend beyond the implementation of the cuts themselves. The colossal reductions in government spending have real and meaningful effects on people's everyday lives and whether the cuts are anticipated or real they are *felt* (McCormack, 2012).

The papers in this special issue explore complex, multiple and networked relations of austerity in the UK and Ireland to build a picture of how austerity becomes in relation with

the mundane, ordinary, or routine. In-depth research engages with the lived effects of austerity to better understand how state losses and reforms are experienced, coped with and resisted. This centres specific relations between austerity and partly connected social-spatial formations and processes including family and friendships, banking and debt, housing, organisations of paid and unpaid work. Paying attention to austerity's entanglement with everyday processes and formations centres its multiplicity, its incoherence, its moments of consolidation, its temporal, rhythmic and affective life. This shows how the spatiality of the everyday is made and remade in relation to austerity, in parks, neighbourhoods, homes, food-banks, and through emotions, atmospheres and moods. Therefore, this special issue politicises and brings to life how micro-situational differences matter to the effects of austerity (Raynor, 2017: 193) how fractured and fracturing forms of implementation enable austerity to take hold and persist (ibid, 2017) and how encounters with austerity build up over time to produce an affective *depth* of experience of austerity (Hitchen, 2019).

Each of the papers in this issue adds something specific to current theorisations of austerity and everyday life; they all demonstrate how austerity appears in and mediates relations between the singular – objects, moments in time, and lives, and the collective – feelings, institutions, neighbourhoods, extended temporalities. These relations are understood throughout the special issue, in, for example, an intensification of already existing gender inequalities, and a reminder that the personal is the political (Hall); through the background hum of anxiety associated with indebtedness and moments in which the same indebtedness surfaces in a deep, focussed encounter (Dawney et al.) through geographies of the psycho-social that constitute a 'squeeze' for low to middle income families (Stenning); in the effects on individual households of raised water costs leading to widespread collective resistance (Hearne et al.); in the relocation of responsibility from the state to the already marginalised individuals (Strong) and communities; in the life-worlds of disadvantaged youths in Ireland (van Lanen) and through a critique of the institutional structures that shape lived experiences of homelessness and joblessness and silence the voices of homeless men (Garthwaite et al.).

Thinking with the materialities, localities and intensities of austerity offers a way to explore relations between the singular and the collective, the intimate and the structural, without writing out the contraction, messiness and ambiguities of austerity. For example, there are the multiple objects through which austerity materialises in papers in this special issue, carpet-less floorboards point to shrunken futures, and the lost hope for home improvements (Stenning); water – integral to the sustenance of everyday life – becomes deeply politicised,

and connects communities of resistance to increased pricing (Hearne et al.); clothes knitted with care (Hall); and food parcels (Strong) hold everyday acts of kindness, *and* the violence of cuts that make them necessary. It is through these ordinary objects that the forces of austerity take form in everyday life.

We have briefly outlined the unequal geographies of austerity as forms of regional injustice; this points towards the localities of austerity. As feminist social geographers remind us, understanding the deep histories of bodies, as well as the places in which they are embedded is integral to a politics of the present, yet those histories are so often disappeared by the localism agenda. Ways of thinking and knowing localities in all their relationality are re-thought and re-made through austerity and accounts of austerity in this special issue. For example, Strong points to a re-distribution of responsibility from the many to the few: those in the deepest poverty are given most responsibility for the burden of deficit reduction. Hall reveals this as a gendered dynamic – it is women, who carry the heaviest load: keeping things going, in community centres in Manchester. Garthwaite et al. ask who gets to speak about the effects of austerity – where are these voices located, to whom are they amplified, and why? Van Lanen, speaks to the home, to the workspace and to the neighbourhood as different but coalescing localities which are re-made in relation to austerity, and shows the impacts of this on the life-worlds of young people. Moving beyond the very important work which maps the unequal distribution of cuts in austerity – in this special issue, we see the home, the neighbourhood, the community centre, the hungry body, the life-world, *and* the region, as localities which are re-made in relation with austerity. And it is these acts of re-making that constitute the continued life of austerity.

Austerity is also made present through affective intensities, including, anxiety (Harris et al., 2018), fear (Clayton et al., 2015), disaffection (Gilbert, 2015), weariness (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2018), pessimism (Coleman, 2016), paranoia (Hitchen, 2019), and feeling squeezed (see Stenning in this issue). Here, austerity is not a pre-existing entity that produces particular affects; rather austerity is brought into being through affective relations. Importantly, these relations of austerity are folded into the everyday practices, rhythms, spaces, habits that make up lived experience. Austerity ebbs and flows in intensity, by which we mean, the intensities of austerity feeling may vary throughout the everyday. Austerity as an affective presence might act – largely unregistered – in the background, or dissipate, only

to re-emerge with an immense force within another encounter. Austerity therefore, does not have to be an acute intensity for it to be felt; austerity can also be a 'low level hum' (see Dawney et al. in this issue), affective atmosphere (Hitchen, 2016; 2019), or structure of feeling (Harris et al., 2018) that permeates the everyday. Austerity is on the one hand elusive, yet on the other hand it is also *sticky* and inescapable. Yet austerity cannot be fully registered by *one* atmosphere, in a way that it becomes coherent and thus contestable, it may be felt as grief, loss, anxiety, but also triumph, a sense of justice done, or things being taken under control (Raynor, 2017). This affective discordance is part of the thing that austerity is. Giving focus to the intensities with which austerity is felt, enables us to understand and take austerity seriously as an incoherent and elusive affective presence.

Time and Austerity

The papers in this special issue expand the vocabularies that geographers can draw on whilst grappling with what sort of thing austerity is. They show how we can make present its continued life through materialities, localities and intensities. This is important. Not only must we, as geographers continue to expose the failings of austerity against its *own* original terms – by evidencing that this is not a short sharp pain for long term gain, this is not ending, this is not always efficiency saving, we are not – and it has become a cliché to say it – all in it together. We must also demonstrate the extent to which austerity logics have taken on a life of their own as they have become embedded in everyday life. In part, Geographers can do this by paying deeper attention to the *time-spaces* of austerity. By pointing to the expansion of austerity beyond the 'short sharp pain' that was initially promised, this special issue begins that work, albeit implicitly. We see the extent to which the violence of austerity continues on some five years beyond a suggested 'end point.' Much more can and should be said about this. Therefore, as a closing statement – we call for greater attunement to 'temporalities' that will further understanding of the geographies of austerity. Just as Adkins (2017) asks us to consider the non-linear time-spaces of contemporary indebtedness, we call for closer attention to the non-linear, multiple, and often dissonant time-spaces that play out in and beyond everyday life, giving shape to austerity (see Hitchen's, 2019 exploration of austerity's non-linear temporalites, Horton, 2016 on anticipatory politics of austerity, and Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, 2018 on experiences of slow wearing out associated with housing hardship). More space should be given to the lingering, seemingly endless expansion of austerity beyond its supposed 'endpoint,' but also to the emergences of austerity in lived experiences of time. Just as places are lost, and damaged unevenly – how too is time-space warped, contracted, or

extended in relation to austerity? How do these effects on time play out unevenly? To what extent are theorisations of 'stretched out present' of late capitalism re-made by austerity? Which futures are lost, opened-up, or eroded and what are the implications of this? Who is granted time to care, to play, to actually live and how are formations of this time unequally distributed? Whilst some of these questions are tangentally approached here, in for example, Stenning's work on the 'shrunken futures' of the squeezed middle, much more should be done to further understanding of the relationships between austerity and time that continue to make and shape the sort of thing austerity *is.*

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