

Austerity Urbanism: From Redistributive transfers to debt based finance

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Abstract

Austerity urbanism is an explanatory concept that alerts planners, politicians and society. The tripartite explanation of Austerity's concept: as a result, solution or even as a cause is part of the underlying understanding of this research article. Austerity embedded in the political choices of neoliberalism. Austerity rooted in the liberal thinking. Austerity Urbanism intertwined with: destructive creativity, deficit politics and devolved risk. After years of Austerity (Urbanism), governments are still ill-prepared to deal with the current urban crisis. New democratic instruments are needed to regain control over capital and to reform, modernize economic and social redistributive efficiency and effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

Austerity urbanism is an explanatory concept that alerts planners, as politicians and civil society, to the implications associated with neoliberal policy choices.

Austerity, as a result, is embedded in the political choices of neoliberalism. In the first part of the research article: *A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEOLIBERALISM*, neoliberalism or the process of neoliberalisation is explained as a contradictory concept, highly contested and dependent on the socio-economic and spatio-temporal context ([Harvey 2005](#)). Though, some common features are arguably accepted, such as the reduction of redistributive policies (decreased social justice, increase in capital inequalities) and a more market-oriented policy approach (city marketing and branding, public-private partnerships, among others) by (local) state.

The second part: *THE QUESTION OF THE PUBLIC DEBT: AUSTERITY AS A SOLUTION*, presents the origin of the concept of austerity. Austerity as a solution is rooted in the liberal thinking of several seminal authors, even if indirectly ([Blyth 2013](#)). John Locke (separation of state and market), David Hume (questioning the rationality of public debt), Adam Smith (reinforcing Hume's idea and reluctantly adding the need for the state to guarantee the welfare system, increasing the redistribution of wealth and reducing the propensity for proletarian revolution to occur). Later, other authors such as David Ricardo and Stuart Mill, discussed the non-existent role or role of the State. Other authors, and most predominantly John Keynes, have argued for the role of the state. Despite the Golden Age (1945 – 1973) ([Hobsbawm 1994](#)) austerity as a solution rather than a problem survived in part because of German-speaking world: German Ordoliberalism and the Austrian School. Austerity as a globally politically imposed condition has more recently been translated into a set of urban policies, categorized as *Austerity Urbanism* ([Peck 2012, 2015](#)).

Austerity urbanism as a cause, the third part: *URBANISATION OF NEOLIBERAL AUSTERITY*, can be summarized in three characteristics: destructive creativity, deficit politics and devolved risk (in social and spatial terms) (Peck 2012, 2015). And it is a useful conceptual framework that provides an opportunity to understand different context responses to the unfolding financial crisis. The long-term negative consequences of *Austerity Urbanism*, especially in cities (places of capital accumulation and reproduction), and on marginalized and vulnerable people, have made austerity a dangerous idea (Blyth 2013).

The fourth part: *A DANGEROUS IDEA: DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES IN TIMES OF CRISIS*, offers some examples of alternative strategies to austerity in the literature. Proactive municipalism based on experimentation (Thompson 2021), degrowth based on improving the quality of life (Schindler 2016), pragmatic municipalism focused on maintaining public services (Aldag et al. 2019), new urban activism (Mayer 2013), new urban social movements (Beveridge and Koch 2019; Chorianopoulos and Tselepi 2017; Davies and Blanco 2017; Di Feliciano 2016; Penny 2017), among others, are examples of alternative strategies for austerity.

Finally, *Austerity Urbanism* is still growing; there is no linear path; even when common features such as the hybridization of different political scales or even when the urban scale becomes a crucial arena for the hegemonic narrative of capital.

2. A Brief History of Neoliberalism¹

Austerity as a result, as mentioned earlier, is rooted in the political choices of neoliberalism. Thus, “what is neoliberalism? Is it an appropriate concept to describe a political and intellectual movement or form of state? (Dean 2012, 150) How was neo-liberalization accomplished, and by whom?” (Harvey 2005, 39)

As mentioned by several authors, as Allmendinger (2017), Dean (2012), Geddes (2011), Goldstein (2012), Harvey (2005) and Peck (2010, 2013, 2017), among others, there is no one static neoliberal conceptualization. There is, in fact, a wide range of contradictory theories and practices in response to local needs, which vary globally in time and space.

These theories and practices that underpin the process of neoliberalisation, however, encompass common forces and conditions. Allmendinger (2017, 105) define neoliberalism as “new modes of socioeconomic regulation and a shift away from distributive policies (...) towards more market-orientated and market dependent approaches aimed at pursuing economic growth”, a “neoliberal market-based populist culture” as mentioned by Harvey (2005, 42).

Dean (2012), Harvey (1989, 2005), Peck (2015, 2017a) and Tulumello (2015) highlights that, on the one hand, the role of the (local) state is to influence the marketing and branding of the city, establish public-private partnerships, promote free markets and free trade, introduce flexibility in labor markets. On the other hand, the role of the state is to transfer responsibilities, in spatial and social terms, to individuals and families, as well as to local institutions. Argentina, Mexico, South Korea, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States, and others, are examples of these broad hegemonic neoliberal reforms (Harvey 2005).

These aggressive neoliberal reforms produce many negative economic, institutional and social effects, particularly on the individuals who should benefit from the redistribution of transfers (unemployment, pensions, etc.) or expenses paid directly by the state (such education, health, housing, transportation, among others). But they also have positive effects on a narrowly

¹ Harvey (2005)

defined capitalist class — the economic elites (Harvey 2005, 2014; Peck 2012, 2015; Piketty 2014, 2015).

As Harvey (2005, 94) points out, “in a Darwinian neoliberal world, the argument went, only the fittest should and do survive”. In this direction, Newman (2013, 1) argues that neoliberalism is a “highly contested concept”, especially in times of economic recession, fiscal crisis, where austerity measures under the umbrella of neoliberalism become legitimate.

3. The Question of the Public Debt²: Austerity as a Solution

In his book “*Austerity – The history of a dangerous idea*”, Blyth (2013, 104 - 115) identifies three key authors in the genesis of austerity, even when these theorists do not present direct arguments for austerity.

The first one, John Locke (1632 - 1704) defended the separation of state and market, in order to limit the former at all cost. David Hume (1711 - 1776) admits that “*public credit will destroy the nation*”. Then, Adam Smith (1723 - 1790) admit, reluctantly, “*that the market cannot exist without the state*”, emphasising the necessity of a welfare system maintained by progressive taxation (supplying defence, education, internal justice, among others). Though, on the shoulders of Locke and Hume's thought, stretch moral arguments against debt, and against state, “*the market can do no wrong, so the fault must lie with the state*”.

Austerity may not be as we know it today, but the three ideas underlined: separation from the state – the growing role of the free market, the fear of public debt – public-private partnerships, privatisation, and the role of the state in influencing and promoting (neo)liberal reforms, both persist.

The austerity intellectual history does not finish with these three authors, authors like David Ricardo (1772 – 1823) and John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) develop opposite visions regarding the role of state, the former denies (as Locke and Hume) any role, and the latter (as Smith) accepts a limited role for it. Thus, John Maynard Keynes (1883 – 1946) with his demand-side economics showed that “*Smith's invisible hand may well have arthritis, and austerity may make it worse*” (Blyth 2013, 127).

Despite these intellectual thoughts, austerity survived as a solution in the German-speaking world: German ordoliberalism and the Austrian school. The former, highlighting some of the classical ideas of Hume and Smith, and against Keynesianism ideas of consumption, argued that “*competition, not consumption, leads to growth*” (Blyth 2013, 137). The latter, Austrian school opposite ideology, with the Ludwig Von Mises (1881 – 1973) and Friedrich Hayek (1899 – 1992), rejected any positive, necessary intervention from the state, according to them, “*austerity is the correct and only possible response to a slump. Everything else is folly.*” (Blyth 2013, 148)

In conclusion, as Blyth (2013, 153) argues, while Locke, Hume, and Smith (among others) “*produced austerity by default*”, German ordoliberalism and the Austrian school “*produced austerity by design*”, and neoliberals “*produced austerity by exclusion*” (...) *any other policy would fail*”, both shared the notion of austerity as a solution and not as a problem. Austerity as a globally politically imposed condition was translated through a set of urban policies, categorised as *Austerity Urbanism* (Bailey et al. 2015; Davies and Blanco 2017; Di Feliciano 2016; Peck 2012, 2015, 2017; Pollio 2016), along with others.

² Piketty (2014, 663)

Thus, with that in mind, the following chapters reveal possible answers to the question raised by Kunzmann (2016, 1314) “*to what extent did the crisis have an impact on urban and regional planning?*”

4. Urbanisation of neoliberal austerity³

Austerity urbanism, a “*particular mutation of neoliberal urbanism*” (Peck 2015, 22) or a “*late entrepreneurial conjecture*” (Harvey 1989; Peck 2017a), can be broadly summarized in three mutually inclusive and collectively exhaust features: destructive creativity, deficit politics and devolved risk (Peck 2012, 2015). Note that this concept was developed to explain United States context (Peck 2015, 2017, 2017a), but its worldwide use, even in different contexts: national or subnational, provides useful conceptual frameworks “*to explore, simultaneously, particular experiences and patterned responses to the unfolding financial crisis*” (Peck 2017, 20).

The former, destructive creativity, recognises that austerity conditions, according to Peck (2013, 2015), strengthen the existing destructive moment in the ongoing process of creative destruction (Schumpeter concept that lies at the heart of process of neo-liberalisation, as mentioned by Harvey (2005) and Blyth (2013), in order to promote growth.

Generally, the consequences reported around the world are: intensive commodification, rationalisation and cuts in public spending, resulting, for example, in limited social protection, in a limited range of services (education, health, sanitation, security, social housing, transportation system) and reconstruction of civic, economic, governmental fields (Bailey et al. 2015; Beveridge and Koch 2019; Davidson and Ward 2014; Davies and Blanco 2017; Peck 2012, 2013a, 2015; Penny 2017; Pugalis 2016; Tonkiss 2013; Tulumello 2015).

Hastings et al. (2017, 13), recognising the attempt to silence marginalised and vulnerable people, emphasises deficit politics by asking “*is austerity urbanism being downloaded onto the poor and marginalised (...), wherein city governments have arguably tried to protect the urban poor?*”. Other authors aligned with this assumption highlight the increase in socioeconomic (and even spatial) inequalities, the impoverishment of low-income groups and the strong concentration of wealth in high-income groups because of the favourable conditions existing in the neo-liberalisation process (Blyth 2013; Di Felicianantonio 2016; Harvey 1989; Mayer 2013; Peck 2013a, 2017; Piketty 2014, 2015).

The latter, devolved risk (and responsibility) points out that austerity measures are both transferred in social (as mentioned above) and scalar terms (Allmendinger 2017; Peck 2015).

The argument that local governments absorb debts and deficits, responsibilities, risks and uncertainties from the supra and national state level is a shared by several authors in different contexts, as England (Hastings et al. 2017, Penny 2017), Italy (Pollio 2016), Netherlands (Savini 2017), United States (Peck 2012, 2013a, 2015): California (Davidson and Ward 2014), Detroit (Schindler 2016), New Jersey (Peck 2017, 2017a), New York State (Aldag et al. 2019).

At the heart of *Austerity Urbanism* are cities: on the one hand, cities as places of capital accumulation and reproduction. In the understanding of Di Felicianantonio (2016), Harvey (1989), Mayer (2013), Newman (2013), Penny (2017) and Savini (2017), local governments, with their own political interests, can become critical actors of production and reproduction, mediators of environmental struggles (for example), negotiators with private developers,

³ Davidson and Ward (2014)

promulgators of ideologies, translators of neoliberal projects aligned with their needs, always seeking alternative forms of revenue to face austerity measures.

On the other hand, cities as places where the way of acting, feeling, thinking and being (*habitus*), and the positions in a field (cultural, economic, social or symbolic capital) find a place (field) where events, interconnections, relationships occur (Grenfell 2008). Austerity reshaped, reconfigured not only urban space, but also urban society (its everyday practices). Given the long-term negative consequences of austerity on cities, on marginalised and vulnerable people, and also on welfare redistribution systems, we can admit that austerity is, as Blyth (2013) argues, a dangerous idea.

Thus, the key questions that arise are: What should be the role of local governments, under austerity? (Aldag et al. 2019); Should local actors continue to embrace *Austerity Urbanism*? (Schindler 2016); Which are the existing alternatives, in times of crisis, in contrast to *Austerity Urbanism*?; “Who can participate and what forms of coalition are possible?” (Beveridge and Koch 2019, 7); “What alliances are forged among which actors, mobilising what resources in pursuit of which goals?” (Davies and Blanco 2017, 1520); “Is there potential for progressive local responses, and if so, from what types of local governments?” (Aldag et al. 2019, 1288)

5. A Dangerous idea⁴: Development of alternative strategies in times of crisis

After identifying and questioning the interconnections between neoliberalism and austerity in the cultural, economic, social and symbolic fields within urban spaces, as well as problematizing the idea of *Austerity Urbanism*, we can now turn to the questions raised earlier, for example, which are the existing alternatives, in times of crisis, in contrast to *Austerity Urbanism*? Error! Reference source not found. offers some examples of existing alternative strategies in the literature.

Beveridge and Koch (2019, 6 - 8) provide three useful (dependent) points, delineating some common practices and strategies across different contexts: first, “*confrontational stance towards austerity governance and attempts to reimagine local state spaces*”. Second, “*should the state defend and protect individual property rights or uphold the possibility for community members to re-appropriate and use urban resources?*” And finally, “*who can participate and what forms of coalition are possible?*”

Thompson (2021, 326 - 328) writes of a new, more proactive municipalism that is based on experimentation rather than speculation. According to this author, there are three models of municipalism: platform municipalism, autonomist and managed municipalism; new state institutions through digital platforms, self-organising governance and democratisation of local economies, respectively.

Additionally, Schindler (2016) proposes “*degrowth as an alternative to capitalism*”, “*an emerging post capitalism paradigm*” (Alexander and Gleeson 2018, 3), a long-term vision for the city of Detroit (after bankruptcy) based on improving the quality of life (the outcome) and not simply on economic growth (driving force), representing as mentioned earlier by Thompson (2021), a willingness to experiment, as opposed to the process of neo-liberalisation (debt-based financing).

⁴ Blyth (2013)

ALDAG ET AL. (2019)	Local government responses to fiscal stress in New York State
BAILEY ET AL. (2015)	Local responses to austerity in the United Kingdom
BEVERIDGE AND KOCH (2019)	Contesting <i>austerity realism</i> : Housing politics in Berlin
CHORIANOPOULOS AND TSELEPI (2017)	Collaborative governance policies
DAVIES AND BLANCO (2017)	<i>Urban austerity</i> regimes in six cities of Spain and the UK
DI FELICIANONIO (2016)	Social movements: housing in times of crisis and austerity, Italy
GRAY (2016)	<i>Soft austerity urbanism</i>
MAYER (2013)	<i>Urban activism</i> - Urban social movements
NEWMAN (2013)	Local governance in the United Kingdom
PENNY (2017)	<i>Austerity Localism</i> in London
SCHINDLER (2016)	<i>Degrowth machine politics</i> - Detroit after bankruptcy
THOMPSON (2021)	<i>New municipalism</i> : a nascent global social movement

Table 1- Development of alternative strategies in times of crisis

Aldag et al. (2019) uses New York State example as an illustration of pragmatic municipalism. Pragmatic municipalism focuses on maintaining public services, either through sharing services or seeking alternative recipes, in response to *Austerity Urbanism* responses. We can see some close parallels, in the formation of a progressive coalition to support the maintenance of public services, with Gray's (2016) theory of soft *Austerity Urbanism*: small-scale collaboration, progressive modes of participation that operate within the constraint of austerity.

The ongoing debate about this new urban activism (Mayer 2013), new urban social movements, for example: Athens with local collaboration initiatives: Solidarity Hub FEAD—help to the most deprived households (Chorianopoulos and Tselepi 2017); Barcelona with a transformation of urban governance (Davies and Blanco 2017); Berlin (Beveridge and Koch 2019), London (Penny 2017), or Rome (Di Feliciantonio 2016) with local housing campaigns, squatting initiatives express the necessity of developing alternative strategies in times of austerity (urbanism).

Although, it must be said that strategies are evolving (Bailey et al. 2015). The process of neo-liberalisation (and consequently austerity) is dynamic; there is not a linear path (strategies). The sceptical ongoing debate must follow, and that's because of the contagious dissatisfaction, the indifference of civil society with politics (Beveridge and Koch 2019).

The inequalities resulting from this process, on the one hand, deform the role of the (local) State, and on the other hand, enhance the forces of participatory and collaborative democracy.

AUSTERITY (URBANISM) TURN: LESSONS FROM URBAN POLITICS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Once understood, it is easy to recognise that, as mentioned by Peck (2012, 2017, 2017a) and Harvey (2014), the consequences (and some causes) of neoliberal austerity measures on urbanisation, although globalised, were not uniformly experienced. The context (geographical, historical, political, among others) and the possible city (Tonkiss 2013, 15) is "grounded in the lineaments of the existing one".

The implications for cities, resulting from neoliberal political choices to transform financial (banking) crisis into (local) state crisis, were mainly:

i) The intensification of the hybridisation of different political scales for a network of forms of governance (between civil society, institutions, local and central government) (Beveridge and Koch 2019; Peck 2012);

ii) The recognition of urban politics as a crucial arena for narratives of hegemonic capital (with local, national and trans-local impact) (Di Felicianantonio 2016; Hastings et al. 2017; Harvey 2014; Peck 2012). The social implications were the weakness of the most important achievement of the twentieth century, welfare state (Piketty 2014, 2015; Therborn 2012).

Ultimately, after years of *Austerity Urbanism*, many (local) governments are still ill-prepared to deal with the current (pandemic) urban crisis.

Uncertainty, experimentation and contestation are both within pro-market (neo-liberalisation process) and pro-state (Keynesianism) strategies. New democratic instruments are needed to regain control over capital and also to reform and modernise economic and social redistributive efficiency and effectiveness (Harvey 2014; Piketty 2014, 2015).

Without this in mind, additional daunting austerity measures on the horizon, entirely different, could be (more) dangerous to urban and social relations than those described above.

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