

Local government on a shoestring: how and where to cut a budget?

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Since 2011, the UK central government has successively reduced local government budgets. Despite some common approaches, local governments show a variety of strategies when forced to reduce spending in order to balance their budgets. These mechanisms come with distinctive political philosophies of local government, as well as divergent effects upon the extent and quality of council services, accountability, and financial sustainability. This variety of responses can be conceptualised as passing on work and responsibilities to (1) the private sector, (2) the third sector, and (3) to individuals. These mechanisms include contracting out service provision and requiring individuals to provide for more of their own care needs. These first three mechanisms fundamentally shift the relationship between local government and residents by increasing the contradictory nature of service provision and by reducing or removing services altogether. Another mechanism is (4) sharing services or even merging local governments to benefit from economies of scale as well as reducing office overheads and staff. The last mechanism is (5) reasserting the role of local government, for example using cheap loans to spend on capital projects to rejuvenate an area and boost the local economy.

Whilst recent changes have been theorised in terms of state shrinkage, our case studies of nine English councils show some examples of local government being proactive in adopting policies that have the potential to be socially progressive, despite austerity. Building on our findings we propose conceptualising this in terms of a continuum between fragmentation and consolidation of the role of local government. Having categorised mechanisms and analysed their effects on the changing state, we finally consider the reasons behind the variety of mechanisms employed. This detailed study of English councils under austerity conceptualises and makes sense of these diverse responses.

Public space at a time of austerity

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Contact points between citizens and local governments often function as unacknowledged public spaces. Many of these public spaces have been a victim of austerity, with government offices becoming merged into centralised locations, often moving away from the neighbourhoods they once served. In many cities, libraries have taken on great symbolic importance as public space which embody the tensions between the need for community resources and as the subject of austerity cuts themselves. While libraries have expanded some of their functions (provide meeting rooms, yoga studios, cafes, council services, services for the elderly, and jigsaw clubs), they themselves have been the focus of budget cuts and spatial reorganisation – leaving many neighbourhoods with depleted or non-existent services. This paper explores these changes in organisation, the symbolic and material resources the library embodies, uses by the community, and the labour used to produce these spaces.

The idea of the library as an open and non-commodified urban space is being challenged by these changes. There is a growing tension between older ideas of the library as public space which offers self-improvement, edification, and access to culture and the uses of the newly organised, often partly privatised, library spaces. As part of this, new funding models have proliferated which emphasize money-making activities and which increasingly rely on a shrinking professional staff aided by a growing volunteer labour force. In particular, we examine one of the new functions in libraries which encourages users to behave as “neoliberal subjects” as libraries enable many to conduct the onerous job searches required to receive public benefits.

Austerity and rescaling of state power: Means of fixing marginality in peripheral economies of Europe?

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Peripheral economies were included in the unfolding system financialized global economy in a highly dependent way that manifested in financial instability and an acute shortage of capital in the productive sectors under the 2008/11 crisis. Although, indebtedness, fiscal problems and economic meltdown hit European peripheries unevenly, austerity was a general recipe for consolidation imposed on such economies. In the eastern periphery, it was a second wave of austerity; the first one related to the transition process resulted in a general roll-back of the state agency that occurred along with rescaling state power (duties and financial means) from central to municipalities, to manage the consequences of neoliberalization of post-socialist economies and promote democracy locally. The recent crisis raised conflicts related to rescaling (recentralizing) state power through austerity schemes – yet got along various scenarios within the eastern periphery depending on the depth and modalities of financialization of the state. Our key argument is that it was a mechanism to throw the consequences of the crisis to peripheries/marginalized groups at sub-national scale as it weakened municipalities as last resorts of managing social crisis, and thus, fixing marginality in space. We rely on Hungary as a case study/yet an extreme in this process, where rescaling/centralization hollowed out local scale step by step by limiting financial scope (access to credit and centralizing state revenues) and functional shrinking. We develop our

argumentation along critical political economic approach and the related concept of uneven development (thus, understanding the state and global processes as mutually constitutive) yet shifting its dominant macro-focus to local scale to understand, how socio-spatial inequalities are reproduced at crisis time across (yet interrelated) scales, and how subsequent crises and related austerity schemes and their socio-spatial consequences are entangled.

Youth labour markets in an era of austerity: a just outcome?

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Austerity is an increasingly important feature of urban society in Western countries. This paper argues that certain segments of society have borne the brunt of the restructuring of labour markets, particularly young people who now 'feel paralysed by their circumstances and crippling self-doubt' (Princes Trust Youth Index 2017). 'Global' cities are becoming more unequal and disconnection and deprivation is rife. Our study examines the 2012 Olympics legacy in relation to youth and employment opportunities in London's East End. The former Olympic grounds is an inner city industrial area that has been marketed as a site of 'creativity', 'entrepreneurship' and 'innovation' with great promises for young people. Yet, this paper illustrates the precarious outcomes (inequalities, alienations and injustices) for young people through examining the issues of equity on the Olympic site. As Valentine (2013) rightly argues, 'the discipline has been slower to consider young people on the cusp of childhood and adulthood: those aged 16-25'.