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To cite this article: Jonathan S. Davies, Adrian Bua, Mercè Cortina-Oriol & Ed Thompson (2020) Why is austerity governable? A Gramscian urban regime analysis of Leicester, UK, Journal of Urban Affairs, 42:1, 56-74, DOI: [10.1080/07352166.2018.1490152](https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2018.1490152)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2018.1490152>



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Published online: 15 Aug 2018.



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# Why is austerity governable? A Gramscian urban regime analysis of Leicester, UK

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## ABSTRACT

Austerity has been delivered in the UK without durably effective resistance. Read through a dialogue between urban regime theory and Gramsci's theory of the integral state, the article considers how austerity was normalized and made governable in the city of Leicester. It shows how Leicester navigated waves of crisis, restructuring, and austerity, positioning itself as a multicultural city of entrepreneurs. The article explores historical influences on the development of the local state, inscribed in the politics of austerity governance today. From a regime-theoretical standpoint, it shows how the local state accrued the governing resources to deliver austerity while disorganizing and containing resistance. Imbued with legacies of past struggles, this process of organized disorganization produced a functional hegemony articulated in the multiple subjectivities of "austerean realism." The article elaborates six dimensions of Gramscian regime analysis to inform further research.

## Introduction

According to Peck (2017), the study of hegemony is about the "ongoing (re)construction of . . . 'normal reality' or commonsense" and, hence, "the 'governance of normalisation' itself" (p. 15). However, the urban governance of normalization is poorly understood, particularly in the context of austerity rolled out since the global financial crisis of 2008–2009. Taking Peck's cue, this article begins from the premise that contesting neoliberal austerity requires a better understanding of normalization and the urban hegemonies sustaining it.

British cities are a good starting point for this endeavor. Austerity has been delivered in the UK without serious impediment despite a brief upsurge in national and urban resistance in 2011 (Nolan & Featherstone, 2015). Drastic cuts to municipal services, public bureaucracies, and voluntary organizations have been rolled out, benefits slashed, and punitive workfare regimes intensified. UK cities are subjected to radical restructuring. By 2020, fiscal equalization will have been abolished, leading to a system more closely resembling that in U.S. cities than the postwar British municipality (Association for Public Service Excellence, 2016). In short, nationally driven austerity has decisively accelerated urban neoliberalization.

In the period since the crisis, British urban studies have charted how austerity hit the poorest areas and people hardest (Meegan, Kennett, Jones, & Croft, 2014) and how the UK government targeted them deliberately (Hastings, Bailey, Bramley, & Gannon, 2017). It captures the discursive architecture of austerity management (Fuller, 2017), the relevance of local traditions in determining priorities (Lowndes & McCaughie, 2013), and experimental means of building new urban economies (Gregory, 2015). Yet, there has been no attention to governability itself: how austerity becomes a

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taken-for-granted dimension of urban political life. The article explores the normalization of austerity through a historically grounded case study in the UK city of Leicester. We cast light on a significant puzzle relevant to many British cities: how could a Labour city council opposed to austerity diligently deliver measures designed to eradicate the institutions and traditions of urban social democracy? Moreover, although the British case is exemplary, it is not exceptional (Crouch, 2011). The governance and disruption of normalization is a ubiquitous challenge, even in cities at the forefront of urban insurgencies (Davies & Blanco, 2017).

Conceptually, the article problematizes the role of collaboration in austerity governance, in this case from a political economy perspective on the urban regime ensemble. It explores our central puzzle through a conceptual framework drawing from Gramsci's (1971) theory of the integral state and Stone's (1989) urban regime theory. The article concludes by suggesting six dimensions of Gramscian regime analysis, arguing that renewed dialogue between these approaches can assist urbanists in disclosing and intervening in the continuum of hegemony/normalization and crisis/insurgency.

### **Renewing a dialogue: Toward Gramscian regime analysis**

Debate about potential dialogue between regime theory and frameworks allied to Marxism began in the mid-1990s, exemplified by Lauria's (1997) influential collection. The outcome of Lauria's endeavor was to make regime theory a foil in the search for scalar and political sensitivity within the regulation approach. Contributors found the regime perspective on coalition building useful for regulation theoretical purposes when situated in a dynamic account of international transformations linked to crises of Fordism (e.g., Jessop, 1997). Dialogue died out around the turn of the millennium, as intellectual concerns diverged. We reopen it in light of new conceptual developments and empirical questions centered on the problem of governability in a period of fiscal retrenchment.

In developing regime theory, Stone (1989) adapted Tilly (1984) in arguing against structural Marxism that the spheres of state, market, and civil society are loosely and only contingently coupled. At the urban scale, rent-seeking corporations control production and development, and citizens exercise electoral oversight of municipalities. The dominant coupling of the state and market spheres materializes in U.S. cities because neither actor can accomplish its goals without access to the resources of the other: local government needs corporate consent to raise revenues; the corporation requires support from city hall to extract rents and profits. The capture of economic and electoral power, respectively by business and city leaders, creates a structuring environment in which these resource-interdependent actors are most likely to form a governing regime. Regime theory therefore downplays "power over" for a social production model, "power to," where pragmatic actors build alliances to "get things done" (Davies, 2002; Davies & Blanco, 2017). Stone (1993) accordingly downplayed the role of ideology in regime formation and maintenance:

In short, the ready availability of means rather than the will of dominant actors may explain what is pursued and why. Hence, hegemony in a capitalist order may be more a matter of ease of cooperation around profit-oriented activities than the unchallenged ascendancy of core ideas. (p. 12)

Within these parameters, urban regimes emerge from the concrete objectives and coalition building endeavors of resource-privileged actors. Stone's central point was that whatever the structural parameters, governing successfully depends on constructive political action to create durable alliances: regime building takes effort.

The Gramscian approach begins from a very different position rooted in Marxism and conceiving of bourgeois society as an emergent totality, riven by the structural contradictions of capitalism—what Gramsci (1971) called the "historical bloc" (p. 137). The crisis tendencies integral to the historical bloc (Gramsci, 1995) create contingencies and instabilities so that sustaining a political order takes work, requiring continuous ideological and political effort.

The theory of the integral state is Gramsci's conception of the political order within the parameters of this contradictory historical bloc (Davies, 2011, 2012). It connotes the provisional unity of "political society + civil society" (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 262–263), where political society is the coercive, ideological, cultural, and administrative apparatus of the ruling class in its governmental guise and civil society the terrain of "so-called private organisations, like the church, trade unions, schools and so on" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 56 *fn*), including today's countless varieties of nonprofits (Chorianopoulos this issue, Pill this issue). For Gramsci, civil society is a terrain of the struggle for state power in this inclusive sense. In trying to make sense of the durability of modernizing capitalist states during the revolutionary period of the early 20th century, he observed that when the state "trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed ... a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238). Without civil society institutions to resource political leadership and foster consent, bourgeois governments would depend on direct coercion.

A Gramscian state of hegemony is accomplished, schematically, when a durable alliance of class forces wins control of economic, political, cultural, and ideational levers of power and thereby exercises leadership across the governmental and societal realms, signifying the "ethico-political moment" of the state (Gramsci, 1971, p. 208). In diagnosing crises, Gramsci (1971) distinguished deep "organic" changes in society (revolutionary upheavals), from everyday phenomena that "are only conjunctural" (p. 250). The theory of hegemony is crucial for explaining why economic crises often do not trigger immediate social and political crises of an organic kind. The multiscale reproduction of hegemony through coercion and consent, throughout government and civil society, is the problematic of the integral state.

Despite foundational differences between the regime and Gramscian perspectives, there are affinities. Like regime politics, the reproduction of hegemony requires continuous labor (Thomas, 2009). Moreover, like Stone, Gramscians recognize that hegemonies are not necessarily ideologically coherent or encompassing. In short, the Gramscian and regime approaches converge at the point of studying how different combinations of actors mobilize a variety of material and ideational resources to produce more or less durable governing arrangements at urban scales. From this perspective, both lend themselves to taxonomical innovation and comparison.

Recent conceptual innovations in the regime approach by Stone himself enhance the potential for a productive conversation. Stone's intellectual journey led him to reflect that he had focused too much on the state–business nexus and (unlike Gramsci) neglected the resources of civil society. He reformulated the core principles of regime analysis in broader terms (Stone, 2015):

The guiding tenet in inner-core regime analysis (its "iron law") is that for any governing arrangement to sustain itself, resources must be commensurate with the agenda being pursued. ... A companion proposition is that for any substantial and sustained agenda, a stable coalition is needed to provide the necessary resources. (p. 103)

This formulation helpfully sacrifices explanatory precision for conceptual parsimony and heuristic plurality (Beauregard, 2012). Its agnosticism toward theoretical foundations allows myriad regime forms to emerge from many background conditions, studied through any theoretical perspective cognizant of the political effort involved in producing and sustaining hegemonies. The iron law therefore creates a larger space for dialogue with Gramscian state theory than in the 1990s. In simple terms, focusing on the constructive dimensions of local state power, in circumstances bequeathed by historical struggle, enhances our knowledge about the contours of urban hegemony and its limits in the age of austerity.

## Methodology

The article reports fieldwork in Leicester undertaken between autumn 2013 and spring 2017. Over 4 years, we conducted 55 respondent interviews, seven nonparticipatory observations of events linked to austerity governance, and four stakeholder focus groups. The interview data set encompasses

Leicester city councilors, officials from the municipality and other public organizations, actors from the voluntary and community sectors, and community and anti-austerity activists. Respondents are coded in the order cited in the article. Elected local politicians are coded P1–P4 and public officials O1–O10. Voluntary and community sector employees are coded VCS1–VCS3 and anti-austerity activists A1–A4. We cite three observations coded Obs1 (voluntary sector social inclusion forum), Obs2 (Social Welfare Advice Partnership meeting), and Obs3 (public meeting about the future of Belgrave Library) and three focus groups coded FG1 (service users), FG2 (themed on multicultural governance), and FG3 (councilors). We also cite correspondence. We performed NVivo content analysis, generating critical themes inductively around a coding framework anchored to our shared project questions across the eight cities.

The article presents the case study as a historically informed urban political economy of austerity governance. Invoking Jessop's (1997) interpretation of Gramscian regime analysis, it focuses on how practices of austerity governance "involve a structurally-inscribed mobilization of strategic bias" (p. 63); in other words, how political responses to earlier waves of economic dislocation became inscribed in the local strategies emerging after the 2008 crash. It explores how austerity governance operates through "a strategically selective combination of political society and civil society" (Jessop, 1997, p. 64, emphasis in original), materializing through a governing regime ensemble that emerged from, but is not reducible to, contradictions of the historical bloc in which it is situated.

The analysis reveals that austerity governance has delivered a functional hegemony through a form of regime politics anchored in "austerian realism." This term refers to the practical imperative to deliver austerity diligently under central government duress, for lack of any perceived alternative, while attempting to preserve services, manage human crises, and build a competitive city. The hegemony of austerian realism as a pragmatic governing disposition is crucial for understanding the normalization of austerity in multiple governing arenas, through multiple coalitions constituting Leicester's urban regime ensemble.

## Austerity and restructuring in Leicester

Located in the East Midlands region of England, Leicester is a city of some 342,000 people. It is notably diverse. In the UK census of 2011, 49.5% of respondents self-identified as coming from an ethnic minority background, up from 40% in 2001 (Leicester City Council [LCC], 2012). The city was projected imminently to become the first UK city with a majority population of Black and minority ethnic groups (BMEs; Balderstone, 2014). As we demonstrate below, multicultural diversity is central to the city's austerity governance strategy (see also Sullivan, Gleeson, Henderson & Lobo, this issue).

With a brief interlude after the Anglo-American war on Iraq in 2003, Labour has long dominated the politics of Leicester, currently holding 52 of 54 elected councilors. Leicester City Council established the office of elected city mayor in 2011 to strengthen municipal leadership, encourage agile decision making, and enhance the profile of the city (Davies & Thompson, 2016). Sir Peter Soulsby has occupied the office since its foundation. The most prominent figure in the politics of Leicester for decades, Soulsby has considerable personal authority and deep knowledge of the city and its history.

For much of the 20th century, food and apparel industries underpinned employment, but Leicester was never reliant on a single sector and also hosted engineering companies like Imperial Typewriters (Gunn & Hyde, 2013). Some respondents recalled 20th-century Leicester in very positive terms. One commented that it had once been among the richest cities in Europe and "quite an affluent place" (A1). At one time, said P1, "employment was easy to get and especially hosiery, knitwear, Imperial Leather." Today, activists, scholars, local historians, and national media sources still cite a 1936 League of Nations report ranking Leicester as the second richest city in Europe (e.g., "Foxes and Tigers," 2016). The claim is not important for its strict accuracy but because the

remembrance of affluent Leicester is part of the urban lore against which it is today represented simultaneously as a city suffering acute deprivation and as a renaissance city.

Leicester experiences very high levels of deprivation, deriving in part from industrial retrenchment, discussed further below. In 2015, UK government statistics ranked it the 23rd most deprived city (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2015). In 2014 it was reported to have the lowest average household income in the country (NOMIS, 2016). The Office for National Statistics (2014) published per capita gross value added trends between 1997 and 2013, painting a picture of incremental and uneven relative urban economic decline for Leicester in that period. However, as we explain below, official statistics do not capture the full extent of deprivation.

In addition, Leicester has been severely affected by austerity imposed after the 2008 crash. By 2020, LCC was projected to have cut its discretionary spend by 63% since 2010, or 40% overall (LCC, 2017). In practice, this means that municipal resourcing for nonstatutory services (for example, leisure, youth services, and libraries) has collapsed and is increasingly concentrated in statutory social services also under stress (Collinson, 2016). In 2010, social services comprised roughly one third of municipal spending in Leicester. By 2020 they will comprise nearly two thirds (Figure 1). National government retains responsibility for funding health and social welfare services. We discuss the governance of workfare below.

In addition, the Conservative UK government is subjecting municipalities to fiscal restructuring. By 2020, the national Revenue Support Grant (fiscal equalization scheme) will have been abolished for the vast majority of cities. Most revenues will be raised locally: through the council tax, housing revenues, fees and charges, and a localized business tax (rates). With the withdrawal of the Revenue Support Grant, council tax will make up more than half of local authority income but with no commensurate increase in revenues. Until now, local business rates have been pooled nationally and allocated according to a redistributive formula. From 2020, they will increasingly be raised and spent locally. Local business rates will therefore become an essential source of municipal revenue (Association for Public Service Excellence, 2016). The city mayor will be permitted to raise business rates (strictly for infrastructure projects) but only with the consent of local business leaders on the Leicester Local Economic Partnership (LLEP). This entity is one of 38 nonstatutory local economic development coalitions established by the UK government in 2011 (Pugalis & Bentley, 2013). This fiscal settlement will make aspects of municipal spending in Britain directly dependent on corporate consent for the first time and create a regime structuring environment more closely aligned to that of U.S. cities.

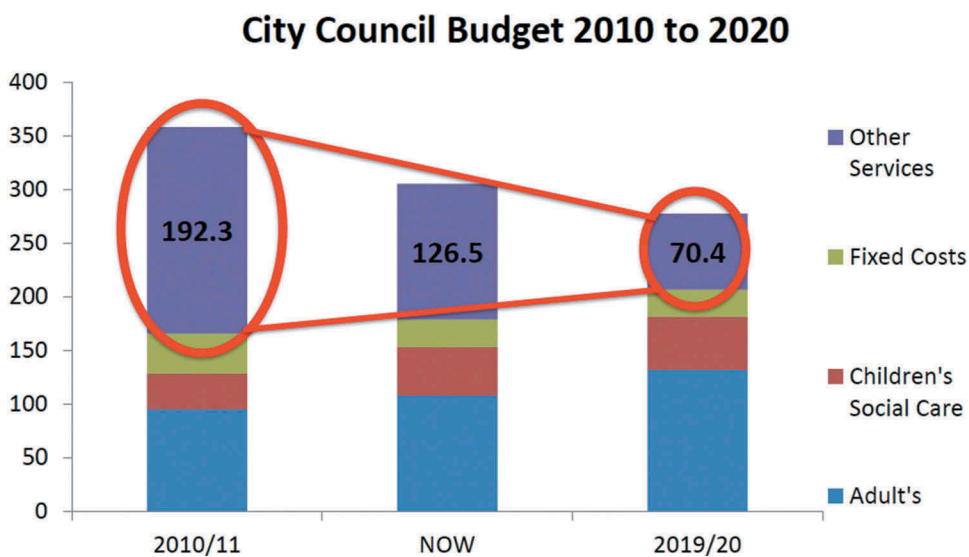


Figure 1. Source: City Mayor's Office.

For local government commentators, many municipalities face a fiscal abyss. The most deprived cities will be forced into race-to-the-bottom policies long familiar to urbanists in the United States (Pill, this issue). Yet, this agenda has rolled out with barely a hint of resistance from Labour municipalities, singly or in concert. The remainder of the article attempts to explain political quiescence, through the study of austerity governance in Leicester.

### The historical context of austerity governance

The roots of Leicester's predicament, and its political response, lie in four interrelated processes converging over a 20-year period from the early 1970s. These processes constitute structurally inscribed conditions from which the strategies and tactics of austerity governance were selected. First, like many cities in Europe and the United States, Leicester was subjected to waves of industrial retrenchment, whose legacies remain inscribed in patterns of deprivation and spatial marginality today (NOMIS, 2016). By 1990, swathes of industry in Leicester had collapsed under Margaret Thatcher's marketization offensive, a point we underscore in the discussion of multiculturalism below (Gunn & Hyde, 2013).

A second related factor was the decline of militant trade unionism as industries were liquidated and struggles to defend them were defeated. The defeats inflicted by the second Thatcher government on powerful sections of organized Labour (notably the miners and the dockers) were decisive in leading then-Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, to profess the so-called new realism, repudiating municipal and industrial militancy (Davies, 2004). Degrading the capacities of the organized working class opened the door to further restructuring while setting the political tone for trade union responses to austerity. As we show in the discussion of Leicester, a painful education in the virtues of caution, defensiveness, and "legalism" (fetishistic adherence to law) made it difficult for unions, also much diminished in size and influence (Davies, 2011), to resist retrenchment forcefully in the post-2008 period.

A third pivotal factor was the Thatcherite crackdown on elected local government and its consequences for local political autonomy. Municipal socialism, a short-lived militant strategy for resisting fiscal retrenchment, ran concurrently with the great union battles of the early 1980s (Cochrane, 1988). It culminated in the struggle against the Thatcher government's decision to impose a cap on local authority rates (the residential property tax of that time). Some 50 local authorities, including Leicester, led by then-Councilor Peter Soulsby, briefly refused to set legal budgets. By 1986, however, resistance to rate capping had collapsed. Unlike Liverpool or Lambeth, Leicester was not a key actor in the municipal socialist struggle, but lessons drawn from the period remain inscribed in the politics of austere realism.

By the late 1980s, the Thatcher government had decimated the industrial landscape, creating mass unemployment. It had inflicted decisive defeats on the organized working class and smashed municipal socialism. The defeat of municipal socialism saw intensified central government administrative control over British local government. The New Labour government of 1997–2010 only tightened national control and oversight with constant meddling, auditing, targeting, and experimentation. Blairism reinforced the sense of a municipal "dependency culture" among chastened and browbeaten Labour authorities (Lyons, 2007). Copus, Roberts, and Wall (2017) go further, arguing that after decades of central domination, UK local government exists in an "abusive relationship" with central government and has fallen victim to "Stockholm syndrome" (p. 180). What we call *legalism* in Leicester is an expression of this culture, reflected in risk aversion, fear of stepping beyond the law, and scrupulously observing statutory minima.

By the early 1990s, the bitter lessons of the 1980s had become inscribed in the "new realist" strategies of Labour authorities across the UK, as they sought rapprochement with business leaders and government to drive the urban revitalization effort in an entrepreneurial direction—what Davies (2004) called the new "logic of market led regeneration" (p. 576). With no prospect of defeating the government through direct action, and little immediate prospect of removing it electorally, Labour municipalities

accepted, at differing speeds and with different degrees of reluctance, that attracting business investors was the only plausible solution to urban decline and poverty.

Leicester appears to have been typical of UK cities in the rollout of these changes (Gunn & Hyde, 2013). However, with the defeat of class struggles and militant municipalism came the rise of identity struggles, in part reflecting changing economic structures and in part the new political assertiveness of women, gay people, and BME groups. Hall and Jacques (1983) captured the spirit: “Britain and other advanced capitalist societies are increasingly characterised by diversity, differentiation, and fragmentation, rather than homogeneity, standardisation and the economics and organisations of scale which characterised modern mass society” (p. 11).

The recognition of gender and identity pluralism, the fourth critical change, spread gradually across the international urban landscape. However, the early embrace of multiculturalism marked Leicester as a pioneering city. Today, multicultural recognition and city branding mobilizes mythologies of minority ethnic entrepreneurship originating with the arrival of Ugandan Asian refugees in the early 1970s (McLoughlin, 2013). This mythology is a crucial plank of austerian realism.

Leicester saw waves of immigration throughout the 20th century, including European refugees fleeing Germany in the 1930s. After World War II, refugees from Poland and Latvia moved into the Highfields neighborhood, followed in the 1950s by African Caribbean people seduced into a now-booming country with labor shortages (Virdee, 2009). Some 3,000 Kenyan Asians arrived in Leicester in 1968, leading the local paper, the *Leicester Mercury*, to complain that the city was full (Marett, 1993). The pivotal moment in the emergence of the multicultural city was the arrival of between 2,000 and 4,000 Ugandan Asians expelled by dictator Amin in 1972. The city council initially sought to deter them with advertisements in the Ugandan press. Mayor Soulsby later described this move as “gloriously counter-productive” because it served only to draw refugees’ attention to the city (Popham, 2013). Marett (1993) wrote that despite the warning, incomers were attracted by Leicester’s reputed “prosperity, industrial harmony, range of industry, cheap housing, work for women and its central position in the country’s communication network” (p. 249). She recorded that the majority of Ugandan Asian newcomers were “previously in some form of commercial enterprise” encompassing professional, petit-bourgeois, and business occupations (Marett, 1993, p. 251). From the outset, they found gainful employment and began opening businesses and acquiring factories “producing hosiery, knitted garments and fabrics and also dye and printing works” (Marett, 1993, p. 251). These developments were the foundations of today’s garment industry, discussed below.

In stark contrast with the prosperous, harmonious Leicester of urban folklore, history records that several hundred Asian workers went on strike at the city’s Imperial Typewriters factory in 1974, claiming racial discrimination. The dispute was cited by the managing director as one of the reasons for liquidating Britain’s last surviving typewriter manufacturer in 1975, costing the city 1,800 jobs (Hudson, 1975). Juxtaposing accounts of a rising Asian entrepreneurial class with those charting a declining organized (multiethnic) working class is instructive, because it points to trends that gathered momentum thereafter.

As traditions of working class organization lost their potency and neoliberalization gained momentum, so political leaders began to construe Leicester’s immigrant populations as entrepreneurial and entrepreneurialism as a virtue. City leaders embraced multiculturalism as new arrivals added economic value and won political influence, reflected in multicultural governance arrangements we discuss below. Machin and Mayr (2007) cited a public official claiming that Leicester’s comparative resilience through recessions was owed mainly to Indian business, a claim echoed in the national media (e.g., Brown, 2010). A councilor interviewed in our study captured the primary logic (P1):

And people I know, they did not bring money with them but they brought their cultural ways, heritage, tradition. And now, same authority is so grateful to these Uganda refugees, people that made their economic contribution to the city, how the city—they have put it on the world map.



In Leicester, therefore, three common tendencies in Britain's urban political economy converged with this fourth local factor: a pioneering embrace of multicultural diversity. As we demonstrate below, this four-way convergence proved conjunctively decisive. By this, we mean that rules of the game established through the interplay of crisis, coercion, and consent from the 1970s to the early 1990s remain inscribed in austerian realism today. They form the structurally inscribed conditions in which the tactics and strategies of austerian realism were selected and applied in Leicester (Jessop, 1997).

### **Austerian realism as a governance strategy**

The primary logic of austerian realism, defined earlier, is to proceed diligently with cuts and restructuring mandated by national government. Municipal actors repeatedly insisted that they are forced to deliver cuts against their will. A councilor quoted in the local newspaper, the *Leicester Mercury*, stated bluntly: "We are not happy making cuts but we cannot set an illegal deficit budget. If we do Eric Pickles will simply come in and take over the running of the council."<sup>1</sup> P2, talking about benefit cuts through the so-called bedroom tax, thought it was "dreadful." However, "as a council you are bound by the law of what the bedroom tax is. You have to implement it."<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the municipality sought explicitly to avoid antagonizing central government. According to P3, "There are political colleagues who would say we've sold out. It's not like that ... drama and conflict aren't in the best interests of the city." The sense of feasibility encapsulated in these comments excluded the possibility of alternatives to the extent of doubting (when interviewed in 2014) that electing a Labour government would have made much difference: "whether that would change I don't know" (P4).

In making a strategic decision to modulate crisis-talk and avoid conflict with central government, LCC chose a strategic path that influenced civil society partners. For example, the breakout group consensus in Obs1, a voluntary sector forum on social inclusion, was that changes were "terrible," "this is really awful," "but it is what it is, we make the best of what we are given" (contemporaneous notes). A group of Voluntary and Community Sector homelessness service providers responding to proposals for a reorganization in 2013 commented: "The voluntary and faith sector understands Leicester City Council's position regarding its need to manage budget reductions." It sought a collaborative approach to "ensure that budgetary reduction is achieved through a managed process of cost reduction, based on evidence of need, across all services. The voluntary and faith sector will play its part in this" (LCC, 2013, p. 59).

P3 explained the logics of austerian realism further, arguing that it is much easier to influence local economic development than nationally imposed austerity: "the extent to which we can influence development is much greater." Concerning austerity, "our ability to make a real difference when the resources of one are dependent on what we're getting by way of benefits, what we are getting by way of kinds of funding. ... We can try and make the best of our job." However, when it came to "attracting inward investment, creating jobs, you can do much more, have much more influence."

In the face of retrenchment and restructuring, most respondents saw developing a competitive city as the only practical counterweight. With LLEP and other agencies, LCC has rolled out city-center revitalization, tourism, heritage, and cultural strategies that might have seemed far-fetched only a few years ago. According to Mayor Soulsby in a recent public lecture, Leicester had fallen victim to a "collective inferiority complex" (contemporaneous notes). Thanks in part to good fortune (discovering the bones of Richard III and Leicester City F.C. winning the Premier League in 2016) and in part to economic resilience among BME populations, he argued that the city had recovered a sense of purpose. Investing in public services remained a priority, but the city must also invest in "the public realm, because the city centre is our shop window" (contemporaneous notes).

Austerian realism is therefore three sided. It reflects the strategy of austerity compliance in the shadow of coercion, the Labour commitment to preserving public services within austerity limits, and the imperative to develop an attractive, competitive city (see Keil's, 2009, concept of "roll with it" neoliberalization). Our research showed austerian realism to be a powerful adhesive, sustaining a cross-sectoral ensemble for coping, managing, and mitigating the worst impact of austerity and

creating an attractive environment for business. It is Leicester's structurally inscribed, strategically selected governing bias, operationalized through multiple coalitions constituting the urban regime ensemble. It resonates with Stone's (1993) argument that regime hegemonies need not be anchored in visionary idealism but can subsist on a shared sense of feasibility. We demonstrate this perspective concretely in discussing three examples: workfare governance, the governance of multiculturalism, and the governance of resistance.

## Workfare governance

Welfare reform is the biggest challenge posed by austerity in a city with high unemployment and income poverty. Many thousands of citizens have to claim benefits of different kinds. As P3 mentioned in preceding comments about the relationship between austerity and development, rules are set and budgets administered by the national Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The system is implemented through local job centers run by the DWP. Under former Secretary of State Iain Duncan Smith (2010–2016), it introduced reforms to deliver cuts in the national welfare budget and reduce so-called welfare dependency. The reforms included a range of benefit freezes and caps, but sanctioning (the removal of benefits for alleged rule infringements) was especially punitive, denying the subject payments for weeks or months. According to LCC (2015), 16,545 sanctions were issued in 2013–2014, affecting several thousand people in Leicester when multiply sanctioned individuals are taken into account.

The intensified workfare system contributed to a growing crisis of subsistence in Leicester and a huge explosion in food bank use. Up to 50% of food bank users were reported to be victims of sanctioning (O1). LCC employed the logics of austerian realism. In one report, it responded to concerns about the devastating impact of sanctions, repeating the following denial of responsibility or agency three times in relation to different benefits. "This Welfare Benefit is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Local Authority is unable to influence the policy or roll out programme" (LCC, 2016, p. 3).

Rather than protest or dramatize the impact of workfare radicalization, LCC sought mainly to contain the fallout. For example, it was allocated resources for crisis payments and established a Social Welfare Advice Partnership to coordinate the local response. The researchers observed a meeting of the Social Welfare Advice Partnership network in 2016 (Obs2). Attending were some 20 people from public agencies, including DWP and LCC, and local voluntary and community organizations. The micropolitics of the network reflected the logics of austerian realism insofar as it operated in a business-like manner, sharing information and seeking to coordinate resources in order to manage and mitigate the fallout from workfare intensification.

However, at one point, the meeting was diverted into a more political discussion about the stress in organizations constantly having to do "more with less" and the pain and bewilderment experienced by people trapped in the workfare bureaucracy. When a delegate from the VCS (also an anti-austerity activist) argued that the network should appeal to LCC to suspend its own welfare advice spending review, the lead official ruled them out of order on the grounds that a body convened by LCC could not petition the mayor. The discussion moved on when the chair said they would write to the mayor expressing delegate concerns.

This encounter casts light on the capillary mechanisms through which austerian realism was operationalized in the practices of workfare governance. The DWP set the agenda and generated crisis management challenges for other organizations. Unable to see ways of challenging the agenda-setting power of the DWP, the welfare advice coalition operated, somewhat grudgingly, as a flanking mechanism. Magnusson (1985) defined the local state in its governmental sense as including institutions and organizations based in a city and having the city as their core concern. From this perspective, DWP occupied a dual role as external policy setter and as part of the urban regime ensemble in its Gramscian sense: a coalition of governmental and nongovernmental actors, collaborating around what Davies (2004, p. 571) called "congruent" (by no means identical) agendas, here anchored in austerian realism.

## Multicultural austerity governance

Multiculturalism has several valences in Leicester's austerity governance. First, it lends force to the city's development strategy, as LCC rolls out strategies for developing cultural and creative industries. Belgrave Road, also known as the "Golden Mile," exemplifies this. Said P1:

So this is why now it is known as the Golden Mile because there is more gold jewellery sold on Belgrave Road than. . . . To me it's not just the gold, the metal; it is the people who have contributed physically, socially, economically. And now the second-generation children, they have done so well. Now, the trade links that some of them started like sending things to India, to other parts of Europe, other countries.

Most striking about this approach from the standpoint of governability was its influence on respondents across the data set. Anti-austerity activists saw the focus on city-center development (Peter Soulsby's "shop window") as unjust and exclusionary, but most respondents accepted that Leicester has no alternative but to enhance its competitive position, in relation to which it mobilizes its reputation for multicultural entrepreneurship. As O2 put it, comparing Leicester with the 1980s and 1990s:

I think what's happened since then is that city economy has recovered. It has become more diverse than it was before. Ironically, I think we've resurrected more of the sort of the hosiery textile sector base than we thought was going to be possible a few years ago. And a lot of that is down to . . . the migration of the Ugandan Asian population and others into the city, some of whom have had that background as well.

## Diversity and class

As the preceding quote shows, city branding is reinforced by mythologies surrounding the entrepreneurialism of Ugandan Asian refugees and their successors. It represents Asian entrepreneurialism as an exemplary, even performative model of urban citizenship. O3 observed of people arriving in the early 2000s:

They were entrepreneurs back in Somalia, but that was before the war, you know. . . . They went to Europe and so they've ended up here remembering that they were entrepreneurs, seeing the Asian community who are entrepreneurs. . . . And then now, we have the Poles, so they just came right afterwards, and they're really hardworking and very good and stuff.

The entrepreneurs migrating to Leicester were credited with underpinning the economic resilience of the city after the crash, especially thousands of Indian businesses in the city (Machin & Mayr, 2007). O4 commented:

In particular the Asian community, have all sorts of little networks and they've not suffered anything like as much in way of unemployment and that sort of thing. Because they've worked, in some ways you could call it a Big Society type of way.

O5 pointed to the importance of Asian family networks in sharing information about jobs and transportation. "So, it doesn't matter if they lose their job in Leicester because they can immediately find work elsewhere and they can get there." Consequently, argued O3, "the quite unique thing about Leicester is, compared to a lot of other cities in the UK . . . the BME community here is not poor."

In McLoughlin's (2013) account, such representations "exemplify the co-option, containment and commodification of Asian-ness" (p. 42). They also contrasted with representations of "native" working-class White communities, which never recovered economically from de-industrialization. One community worker in a traditional working-class area (VCS1) commented controversially: "The local community are quite demotivated, lethargic and are happy with their lot. There is a high benefit dependency locally . . . and so long as they are getting their benefits they are quite happy." Most respondents rejected this idea of a dependency culture, framing cultural pathology in a subtler juxtaposition with Asian communities, said to "have looked after themselves very much better than say, the White community who have . . . sort of run by different rules" (VCS1).

Hence, “what we have is . . . I don’t know why, but over time is that sort of . . . you have sort of the White adults in sort of the deprived areas. They just don’t have the same level of skills as a lot of our BME population have” (O3).

It is important to record that cultural–pathological readings of working-class White alienation do not apply to austerity itself, which respondents mostly detested. Their grip is situated not in neoliberal idealism but in the construal of practical challenges framed by austerian realism (Stone, 1993): how communities must, of necessity, adapt and respond to an otherwise insoluble predicament. The idea that developing a culture of self-help was the only viable response was not an apologetic for austerity, but it made the commercial *dispositif* virtuous. Working-class White anomie was rendered pathological, whereas working-class Asian and Black experiences of exploitation and racism were veiled. Multiculturalism hails deprived citizens of all ethnicities with the injunction to assimilate entrepreneurial culture and practice, with select BME groups as exemplars. In short, it celebrates diversity in a way that simultaneously conceals and mobilizes class.

The approach exercised considerable pedagogic force, anchoring austerian realism in the leadership aspiration for entrepreneurial flourishing: what we call the regulative idea of Leicester’s regime ensemble. The specific tonalities of this strategic bias emerged from local understandings of the conjunctively decisive shifts discussed earlier. They were operationalized through the LLEP, to which we now turn.

### **Multiculturalism and sweatshop labor**

It is also important to record that its power as a governing disposition did not mean that BME entrepreneurialism was universally celebrated among activists or BME groups. On the contrary, several respondents drew attention to continuing and systemic racism and challenged ethnic stereotyping (e.g., FG1, FG2, P1). Respondents also highlighted research undertaken by the University of Leicester (Hammer, Plugor, Nolan, & Clark, 2015), exposing sweatshop labor in the garment industry and challenging exaggerated claims that BME groups in Leicester are “not poor” (O3). It revealed that thousands of people in the area, disproportionately Asian women, work in textile micro-enterprises for some £3 per hour, less than half the national minimum wage, a rate achieved by employers underdeclaring working hours. This ultra-exploitative employment ecology in the fragmented postindustrial garment economy is a dark side of BME entrepreneurialism.

Yet, as a governance problem, the sweatshop economy was framed by austerian realism. At the initiative of local retailers worried about collateral reputational damage, the Ethical Trading Initiative (a global multi-agency partnership) developed a program to address endemic breaches of labor rights in Leicester. It formed a partnership of concerned retailers, industry bodies, unions, nongovernmental organizations, community groups, LLEP, and LCC. The Ethical Trading Initiative program led to the Hammer report (Hammer et al., 2015), which laid bare the sweatshop economy and called for a repertoire of measures, including enforcement.

However, the report proved controversial. Both LLEP and LCC were reticent about enforcement and concerned about negative publicity. Local officials thought it too negative and sought to emphasize good practice so that they “weren’t throwing the baby out with the bathwater” (O1). O6 said that if unethical trading “raises its head too high, it could put off potential employers . . . realistically, the only solution going forward is employment.” Moreover,

there are enforcement rules we could potentially use but they’re counter-productive. . . . It’s about education of the sector. But again, you’ve got to be very politically sensitive about that . . . because when you’re looking to pull businesses . . . you’ve got to be careful. You don’t want to put them off coming into the city if you’ve got a negative perception.

This vignette exemplifies the adhesive power of austerian realism. All local actors opposed sweatshop labor. At the same time, they sought to avoid conflict to protect Leicester’s reputation with investors. With an ultrafragmented labor force also very difficult to organize (Hammer et al., 2015), the ensemble

of concerned retailers, LLEP, and LCC converged around what was effectively a damage limitation and depoliticization strategy. This approach is the legacy of industrial collapse and deunionization, of global economic competition, deregulation, and place marketing imperatives (Hammer et al., 2015). There are multiple dynamics of “organization” and “disorganization” in play: the raft of factors structuring the textiles micro-industry and exposing labor to sweatshop conditions on the one hand and the logics of austere realism animating Leicester’s development coalition on the other.

### **Multicultural community development**

However, Leicester’s community development coalition highlighted another important side of multicultural governance. As mentioned earlier, successful immigrant groups quickly won political influence in the city. Respondents explained how, as part of the multicultural turn, an informal multicultural governance coalition emerged including LCC, statutory agencies including the police, the editor of the *Leicester Mercury*, and BME community leaders. LCC provided infrastructure grants to BME umbrella groups to help with assimilation, community building, service provision, and communication. Interviewed in 2013, O7 explained:

We do have an active community and voluntary sector in the city and we do interact with them, some of that is formal because we have contracts with organizations to help us engage with certain communities; e.g., the Leicester Council of Faiths or the Federation of Muslim Organizations, the Gujarati Hindu Association, Race Equality Council—recognizing value those groups can bring in helping us understand/engage with those communities of interest.

The process described by O7 is an important facet of regime building, involving the aggregation of resources among actors with congruent interests: municipal cash and facilities to build community infrastructure, in exchange for engagement, communication, and information pursuant to successful integration. At the same time, the network collaborated to manage and diffuse tensions, as it did when racists marched through Leicester in 2010 (BBC, 2010).

Under austerity, however, several BME umbrella organizations were defunded, justified partly on equality grounds. The statutory Public Sector Equality Duty means that funding one minority group while defunding another could be deemed discriminatory. Some groups have used Public Sector Equality Duty to challenge austerity cuts, but in this instance, legalism resignified equality from a substantive claim to social justice into a procedural constraint. Secondly, the communicative logic in the preceding quote was subsumed by performance management logics and the imperative to “deliver” (an important theme for public officials in FG3).

Austere realist logics of pragmatism and legalism combined to produce a further logic to the effect that “if you can’t fund everyone, you can’t fund anyone.” One significant umbrella group, the African Caribbean Citizens Forum, collapsed as a result of defunding. VCS2 wrote to us:

All that is left of the African Caribbean voluntary and community sector is a few single-issue clubs/associations, and a number of small volunteer run, led and managed social groups that do not have the means, capacity or capability to fulfil a link or communication function. Sadly, the poor outcomes achieved by the African Caribbean community have changed very little since the Scarman Centre report 20 years ago because the Black community in Leicester is small and dispersed enough to ignore politically. It migrated here to help fill labour shortages after the war, suffered unremitting institutional race discrimination but has made significant contributions to the development of “multicultural” Leicester only to find that when the going gets tough again the Black community loses what little it has had. Only time will tell on the impact.

It is important to record that the multicultural ideal remains strongly embedded in the politics of the city and its continuing (if selective) celebration of diversity as the source of economic resilience and cultural vitality. However, multicultural governance has been transformed, with austerity uprooting the institutional basis for the informal coalition established in the 1980s. The implications for both the economic and communitarian dimensions of multicultural governance remain to be seen.

## Resistance: Between realism and revolt

According to Davies and Blanco (2017), regime theory is limited by its inattention to resistance as a durable facet of urban political life. They argue that everyday resistance such as in Spain (Blanco, Bianchi, and Salazar, this issue) can limit or deplete the governing capabilities of neoliberal austerity regimes, even when they hold municipal, state, and economic power. Conversely, successful regimes are able to contain or marginalize resistance. Leicester has seen vibrant campaigns over several years; for example, in defense of fire, homelessness, hospital, and library services (Davies & Thompson, 2016). However, our research shows that austere realism influenced both the governance and practices of resistance, operating as a functional containment mechanism.

The city's program for Transforming Neighbourhood Services exemplifies this. LCC sought, through this program, to deliver budget cuts while preserving facilities in new multiservice hubs; for example, by moving public libraries into community centers. Based on research in other cities, LCC managers chose to divide Leicester into six program areas. According to O8, discussing lesson-drawing from other cities,

What we learned was that we didn't want to do the whole thing in one go ... because that seemed to generate concern, protest, anger all over the place and it took a long time for people to even accept what had happened. So a different approach was taken, which was ... to divide the city up into five or six areas.

O9 explained further:

So, if we think that the most challenging area is in the east of the city, and arguably, that has so much complexity because of the diversity of the communities there and so forth, it makes sense for us to start in the less complex areas. Learn the lessons and apply those as we move on.

The most challenging area did indeed generate significant resistance to the proposed closure and sale of the Belgrave Library. The campaign was well organized, linking citizens from multicultural backgrounds to strong political support from local members of parliament and ward councilors. We observed the crucial public meeting of more than 300 residents (Obs3). At this meeting, the lead councilor repeatedly voiced the logic of austere realism. They applauded critical sentiments while simultaneously communicating an implacable message:

However, we have to accept the world is changing. ... We try to be as inclusive as possible. ... But the reality is, we don't have the budget, I am not going to hide the reality, and I cannot explain any more clearly today the reality of the situation. (contemporaneous notes)

These repeated invocations of "reality" generated angry responses. One speaker said they "know about central government and understand that." What disappointed them was that "listening and seeing how the councillor is acting today, he seems more like a chief executive than a Labour councillor." The meeting applauded thunderously (contemporaneous notes). Shortly afterward, LCC reversed the proposed closure, marking a victory for the campaign. But, asked why similar protests had not been seen elsewhere in Leicester, A2 made an astutely Lefebvrian observation:

Well, I think we hear about things at different times. So ... the different libraries were closed before ours was and we didn't know it was gonna come to us. So, I think in an ideal world yes, we would all stand together. But the reality is services are not cut in one swoop, because then you would have the whole city up in arms against you if you were the council.

From the standpoint of officials mired in austere realism, this approach was good, pragmatic management. From A2's perspective it was divisive, undermining potential for a citywide movement.

The study suggested, secondly, that the experience of defeat in the 1980s continued to cast as much of a shadow over anti-austerity politics as it did over municipal strategy. VCS3 commented on the prospects for greater militancy, capturing the austere realist zeitgeist:

Well, it's a bit ... a losing game, isn't it really. I mean when diehards tried in the past, it hasn't succeeded really. It's ended up losing what power it had, so that's like picking a fight with no chance of winning it.

This quote also encapsulates the perspective dominating the UK trade union movement since the 1980s and mirroring that of Labour municipalities.

For example, in early 2017, the local branch of the public sector union, UNISON, issued a new demand to LCC:

At present the best way in which the local Labour Group can support the people of Leicester is to refuse to carry through further Tory cuts by setting a *legal* “no cuts” budget for the duration of the next three years. (UNISON Leicester, 2017, emphasis in original emphasis)

Though this demand signaled an upshift in anti-austerity campaigning, it was framed by operating logics dominating local politics since the “new realism” of the late 1980s. The city mayor, in an obdurately austere realist intervention, dismissed the UNISON proposal as “pure fantasy,” arguing that the city council “going bust will not lead to the Tory Government crumbling.”<sup>3</sup>

A third factor limiting resistance was the disorganization imposed by austerity itself. According to A3, talking about workfare, “there is a theory . . . if you keep people’s bellies empty they haven’t got time to be politically active because they’re trying to feed themselves and keep a roof over their heads, over their kids.” For A4,

I think it is precisely around the issue of everyone is being made to look at their own individual crisis and they are so basically swept up in trying to deal with that, that it is very difficult for them to look at it in a wider way which I think would potentially help every individual.

The workfare regime was thus seen as atomizing and silencing welfare claimants in multiply coercive and consensual ways.

For a time, at least, the politics of workfare also divided those trapped in the regime from those in relatively secure employment, pitching “strivers” against “skivers.” According to O10, interviewed in 2013, the “cost of living crisis has been attenuated a little by the recent . . . the low levels of inflation . . . fall in oil prices which is no doubt welcome in many households and indeed businesses.” For P3, interviewed in the same year, “Actually for most people most of the time this doesn’t affect them very much and they don’t want to do anything different much from what they are already doing . . . for most people life goes on.” Though millions of people suffered falling incomes, they were offset to a degree and for a time by plummeting mortgage and energy costs. A significant fraction of wage earners was not directly exposed to the crisis of social reproduction in Leicester and for this reason was largely unaffected, at a personal level, by austerity.

The experience of Leicester reinforces the argument that as the resources of austerity governance joined up, so resistance was weakened, contained, and disorganized. Explanation for this outcome cannot be reduced to the lessons of the 1970s and 1980s, but it is intelligible only in the long shadow they continue to cast. Resistance was durable in Leicester, but austere realism contributed actively to the spatial containment of resistance and to the muting of contentious politics.

### **Developing Gramscian regime analysis: Governability and its limits**

The remainder of the article reflects on what Gramscian regime analysis discloses about the governability of austerity in Leicester, presenting a six-point analysis in heuristic form (Table 1). First, the study shows historical analysis to be crucial for understanding practices of urban austerity governance. The Thatcherite offensive of the 1980s created conditions in which national government could dictate the agenda and anticipate local compliance. A coercive and ideological apparatus forged in bitter political struggles over earlier crises of Fordism and Keynesianism underpins this enduring dependency culture. The harsh education of municipalities, trade unions, and elements of the VCS in the follies of militancy continues to set the parameters of both urban governance and resistance today. The outcomes of these conjunctively decisive struggles form *the structurally inscribed conditions of local action*, from which Leicester’s local regime ensemble adapted to the privations of austerity and restructuring.

**Table 1.** Urban governability—A Gramscian regime theoretical perspective.

Gramscian regime analysis	Leicester
Structurally inscribed conditions of local action	De-industrialization, pacification of unions and municipal left, plus rise of multiculturalism: conjuncturely decisive in determining local state response to crisis and austerity
Strategically selective hegemonic strategy	Multiple facets of austerian realism: pragmatic compliance, austerity mitigation, and entrepreneurialism. A functional hegemony
Regulative idea	The entrepreneurial city inspired by foundational mythologies of multiculturalism
Urban regime	Ensemble of coalitions sustained through coercion and consent: the local state in its inclusive sense articulated through austerian realism
Resistance and containment	Durable low-level resistance, muted by cultural, spatial, class, and territorial modes of containment. Legacies of Thatcherism in damping anti-austerity struggles
Contradictions and pathologies	Fragmenting multicultural governance, working-class anomie. National crises of political authority, ideology, and representation. Weakly articulated in Leicester's urban politics

Second, Leicester has developed strong political and managerial leadership with the clearly enunciated and widely shared disposition that we term *austerian realism*. This derives from the combination of structural constraint, lesson-drawing, and local strategic calculus. It has been a powerful tool in simultaneously articulating the injustice of austerity, the necessity of compliance, and the imperative to position Leicester as an entrepreneurial city. Austerian realism is Leicester's *strategically selective hegemonic strategy*. It has proven to be a powerful adhesive for the multiple coalitions and alliances constituting the urban regime ensemble.

Third, and derivatively, austerian realism endows the city with qualities and characteristics required to navigate the challenges ahead. The torsion between the city's growth strategy and its valorization of multicultural entrepreneurialism is "productive" in the sense that it hails citizens with an intelligible strategy for the future. It is "destructive" insofar as it veils shared class and racial injustices. This future-oriented dimension is the *regulative idea* enhancing the hegemonic grip of austerian realism.

Fourth, austerian realism successfully integrated an ensemble of local state actors through a range of coalitions comprising departments of state, LCC (councilors and officials), local businesses, and a variety of civil society actors. The regime ensemble materialized through multiple coalitions mobilized around congruent interests and resource interdependencies. Warranted by austerian realism, actors pulled in the same broad direction insofar as they were—however grudgingly—orchestrating the delivery and management of austerity. The regime ensemble constitutes the local state in its Gramscian, inclusive sense (municipality, government agencies in the city, business leaders, and elements of organized civil society), sustained through coercion and consent. It constitutes what has been, since the onset of austerity, a functional *urban regime*.

Fifth, the study demonstrates how austerian realism contained potential anti-austerity forces. The political rationalization of defeat together with class, cultural, and spatial disorganization denuded anti-austerity forces of the political vitality they needed to pose a threat to the regime, locally or nationally. Through good fortune and strategic calculus, national government divided the working-class population, pacifying some while bludgeoning others. Austerity governance held the requisite unities and divisions in civil society in place. These resistance *containment mechanisms* were exercised through the urban regime ensemble (Bayirbağ, Davies, & Munch, 2017).

Finally, what kind of hegemony does Leicester's austerity governance signify? Gramsci (1971) described the ideal-typical state of hegemony as the attainment of "intellectual and moral unity ... on a 'universal' plane" (pp. 181–182). The preceding analysis shows the hegemony of austerian realism in Leicester to be functional but by no means elevated in the sense implied by this quotation. It rather "works" around the sense of shared feasibility among actors with congruent interests posited by Stone (1993).

At the same time, it foments bitterness and alienation, reflected in preceding quotations and the more general crisis of political authority signified by the Brexit vote of June 2016 and the rise of Corbynism: the ideas of socialist politician and Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, mentioned as a



source of hope by some respondents. These are manifest and potential *contradictions and pathologies* operating in and above Leicester's austerity regime ensemble.

On the national stage, Corbyn's meteoric rise shows that millions of people have had enough of austerity and will vote for alternatives to both pseudo-cosmopolitan neoliberalism and conservative nationalism, when these are presented effectively. The infectious spirit of Corbynism may be dissipating austere realism by emboldening activists, trade unionists, and perhaps even browbeaten Labour municipalities, some of which are moving toward remunicipalization strategies. As yet, however, nationally manifested crises of neoliberal austerity governance, what Jessop (2016) called "the organic crisis of the British state," remain weakly articulated in the urban politics of Leicester.

To return to the continuum of normalization-hegemony and insurgency-resistance discussed at the beginning, we suggest that the heuristic framework in Table 1 can be applied to disclosing many different modes of urban governance. The six dimensions of Gramscian regime analysis contribute to disclosing structural and constructive dimensions of urban power. They are a lens through which to explore historical conditions and contemporary political economies of normalization, crisis, resistance, and transformation (Peck, 2017). In other words, the heuristic is a tool for understanding the positioning of cities in contemporary political economy, analyzing the balance of forces constituting (or failing to constitute) a local state capable of delivering governing agendas pursuant to, or against, neoliberal austerity.

## Conclusion

The article began with a puzzle: how is it that austerity has proven so eminently governable? How did Labour municipalities become effective agents of the dismantling of social democratic institutions and traditions? By employing Gramscian regime analysis, the historically contextualized study of austerity governance in Leicester reveals a favorable conjuncture, in which the legacies of past crises, struggles, defeats, and political reorientations created a powerful structural, strategic, institutional and ideological bias toward delivering austerity without fuss, consolidating a local regime ensemble, and leaving the capacity to resist weakened and disorganized. Consequently, those least able to cope were compelled or persuaded to absorb the costs of austerity, engendering crises of social reproduction at the individual level that remained largely concealed in the urban political realm.

Incipient crisis tendencies and anti-austerity movements abound at the national and international levels (Doussard & Lesniewski, 2017; Parés, Boada, Canal, Hernando, & Martinez, 2017). Pathologies, or cracks in the austerity governance of Leicester, could further undermine containment mechanisms and aggravate the deep crises of authority and representation afflicting British politics (Jessop, 2016). Yet, the local regime ensemble in its inclusive Gramscian sense remained intact in Leicester and largely unchallenged, as our research concluded. It has proven capable of mobilizing resources, and thus the power, to contain urban politics in its emancipatory sense. Austere realism has been conjunctively durable, reinforcing Gramsci's (1971) warning that economic crises do not in and of themselves produce organic political crises—and moreover that political crises have no necessary correlate in the rise of militant anti-austerity struggles.

The article sought through the tools of critical and heuristic theory to disclose means by which order has been sustained in the face of manifold injustices and institutional turbulence. However, to recognize a functional austerity regime is not to imply that it is "sutured" or that contradictions and pathologies are forever manageable. Corbyn himself made a Gramsci-like observation, arguing after his unexpected election surge that 2017 was the year in which "politics finally caught up with the 2008 crash" (Sparrow, 2017). Understanding the structural and constructive means of organization, disorganization, containment, and overflow casts light on both the limits of hegemony and the limitations that anti-austerity activists must overcome, if they are to build on small successes and revitalize the urban "political" (Dikeç & Swyngedouw, 2017). In juxtaposition with other cities discussed in this issue, Leicester presents an opportunity for dialogue about how this might occur.

## Notes

1. Eric Pickles was secretary of state for communities and local government 2010–2015.
2. The “bedroom tax” is a sanction imposed on housing benefit claimants deemed by government officials to have one or more spare bedrooms.
3. Cited in the *Leicester Mercury*.

## Funding

The research reported in this article was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council: “Collaborative Governance under Austerity: An Eight-Case Comparative Study” (Ref. ES/L012898/1), led by Professor Jonathan Davies. See <http://cura.our.dmu.ac.uk/category/austerity-governance/>. The first phase of the study was funded by the Spanish Government’s Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness under its National Development Plan (Ref. CSO2012–32817), led by Dr Ismael Blanco. See <https://transgob.net>.

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