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Introduction

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Introduction

Austerity as an environmentally dangerous idea: A political ecology approach

Maria Kaika, Rita Calvário, and Giorgos Velegrakis

This book documents austerity as an idea and a practice that is as dangerous for the environment, as it is for the economy and for society (Blyth, 2013). The aim is to open a debate on the ‘political ecology of austerity’ by documenting systematically for the first time the largely ignored environmental ‘side-effects’ of the austerity policies that were implemented after the 2008 crisis, some of which continue being implemented today, even during the global coronavirus pandemic. We emphasise how, although the economy will – in all likelihood – recover from both the financial crisis and the coronavirus pandemic crisis, the environmental effects of austerity will stay with us forever, or at least for many decades to come.

The book’s multidisciplinary (geography, sociology, anthropology) and multi-sited (Ecuador, Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Canada, Australia) perspectives converge in documenting and explaining two key environmental consequences of austerity. First, the way in which austerity contributes to shifting towards more uneven and unequal ‘environmentally’ and ‘socially’ developmental practices and policies, and the increase in social inequalities and environmental deterioration that these practices entail. Second, the way in which austerity contributed to the proliferation of social movements and initiatives which resist the increase in social inequality and environmental destruction, and propose alternative ways to organise socio-environmental relations in order to deal with the economic crisis.

We argue that understanding both of these facets of the socio-environmental consequences of austerity are equally important. Hence, the chapters in this book document how austerity led to environmental degradation, land grabbing, and the private appropriation of the commons, affecting the subaltern classes and social groups. But the chapters also document how austerity led to insurgencies and new social movements that generated new practices to protect the environment from further destruction and new imaginaries for more socially just and environmentally sustainable futures.

The book addresses the issues mentioned earlier in three ways. First, analytically, by drawing attention to the way environmental protection is pitted against economic growth during austerity periods, when the regression of environmental concerns in favour of addressing socio-economic concerns is

normalised. Second, empirically, by substantiating (through detailed case studies) the link between austerity politics, environmental destruction, and deepening of social inequalities along class, race, ethnicity, and gender lines. Each case study presented in the book exemplifies the sequence of events that led from economic crisis to austerity policies, and from austerity to the revamping of pro-growth policies that boosted capital accumulation while at the same time led to increased extractivism, environmental degradation, and ‘value grabbing’ (Andreucci et al., 2017) and accentuated exploitation and marginalisation of Indigenous people, migrants, racialised communities, women, the working-classes, and the poor. These policies are entangled in discourses and practices that involve climate denial, colonialism, racism, and other exclusionary views of the socio-environmental milieu. Third, the book highlights that, even though one decade of austerity policies took public attention and discourse away from environmental concerns, it also led to a new wave of activism that struggles to bring the environmental question back into the heart of public concern. These struggles link environmental justice to social justice.

Austerity as class politics = austerity as environmental politics

The idea, or ideology, of austerity as a cure to economic crisis has a long history. As a recipe for reduction of public spending in expectation of reduced state budget deficits, it is closely linked to the efforts of world currencies to stay within the ‘gold standard’ during the early 20th century. But from the Great Depression onwards, austerity started receiving systematic criticism as a means for economic recovery during economic downturns, notably by John Maynard Keynes, who argued that the right time for implementing austerity are periods of economic boom, and not periods of economic slump. The negative associations of austerity with social upheaval, extreme nationalism, and politics of hatred that led to both the first and second world wars, combined with the success of post war Keynesian policies to boost western economies through public spending – not austerity – contributed further to increasing scepticism towards the effectiveness of austerity politics for achieving economic recovery.

After the Second World War austerity was put to rest. But it was resurrected after the 2008 economic crisis by neoliberal economists and policy makers who promoted austerity as a uniquely appropriate tool to create a ‘confidence boost’ for businesses which were at the time under economic stress. In unison, the IMF, the World Bank, and the European Central Bank adopted wholeheartedly austerity after 2008 in Europe as an ‘expansionary tool’ and a recovery policy for the economy. The three powerful international organisations pushed and often demanded austerity textbook economic policies: cuts in state budgets, and reduction of wages and prices. Despite a wealth of evidence suggesting the opposite, i.e., that austerity measures accentuate rather than repair socio-economic problems under conditions of crisis (Krugman, 2009), these organisations insisted that the only way

out of the crisis was to implement policies of budgetary discipline (Douzinas, 2013, p. 28). Therefore, they advocated that austerity would restore competitiveness and inspire ‘business confidence’ since governments would “neither be ‘crowding-out’ the market for investment by sucking up all the available capital through the issuance of debt, nor adding to the nations already ‘too big’ debt” (Blyth, 2013, p. 247).

Many countries across both the global north and the global south were forced into austerity this way. But this post-2008 crisis austerity variant was different to earlier, 20th century ones. It was implemented under a very different economic, social, and political context, largely known as neoliberalism, and broadly understood as a political and economic framework characterised by free-market and market exchange as a self-righteous ethic in its own right (Harvey, 2007). This particular version of austerity that Peck and Theodore (2019) termed ‘neoliberal austerity’ is an economic policy of budgetary or fiscal discipline that involves the usual cuts in a state’s social spending, decline in public investment, and deliberate reduction of domestic wages and prices, but also a decline in welfare provision, and increased privatisation of public services and other key sectors of the economy. These measures, that significantly roll back the welfare-state, reduce real wages and social rights, and enclose any environmental commons left (Douzinas, 2013; Peck et al., 2012), were suggested or imposed by the aforementioned international organisations after 2008 as particularly apt for slumping economies. The new austerity ideology advocates argued that these measures would reduce state deficits, increase economic competitiveness, and improve the confidence of the markets and private investors; hence, economic growth would follow (Blyth, 2013).

It did not work. Not only did the neoliberal variant of austerity not boost confidence and reduce public deficits, it resurrected dangerous ideology that caused public debt to swell. The economic consequences were detrimental. Ten years onwards from the 2008 economic crisis, the IMF reported an increase in the median general government debt-GDP ratio from 36 to 51 percent, and an increase in central bank balance sheets in advanced economies “several multiples the size they were before the crisis” (Chen et al., 2019, p. 5).

The social consequences of austerity were equally devastating and more far-reaching: deterioration of physical and mental health, direct losses in human life (45% increase in suicides in Greece in the years that followed the crisis), and unprecedented levels of poverty and child poverty in advanced western economies (Kaika, 2012; Stuckler & Basu, 2013).

The devastating economic and social consequences of austerity did not fall equally amongst all segments of the society. Mounting evidence shows that since 2008, austerity acted as a form of class politics that increased inequality (Harvey, 2011) by forcing a “class specific put-option ... exercisable by the top 30 percent on the bottom 70 percent of the income distribution” (Blyth, 2013, p. 259; see also Chen et al., 2019; IMF, 2012). The serious social effects of

austerity across different geographical and cultural contexts became the central focus of a significant body of research, including the dynamics of anti-austerity mass protests and social upheaval, but also the re-emergence of politics and practices of hate, populist nationalism, social exclusion, and violence (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014; Featherstone, 2015; Kaika & Karaliotas, 2014; Lapavitsas, 2013). The examination of austerity as class politics offered significant insight into the social and economic consequences of this dangerous idea.

However, the analysis of austerity as class politics and as a tool of social engineering omitted a very significant parameter: the link between austerity and re-engineering socio-environmental relations. Indeed, the significant environmental impact of austerity programs has received surprisingly little attention. As political ecology scholarship documents, every shift in economic and social policies that redistribute wealth is by necessity linked to a shift in environmental-social interactions (Peet et al., 2010). The recent use of austerity as a tool for re-engineering socio-economic relations is no exception to that. It had serious environmental consequences, that have not yet been fully documented and which range from land grabbing, privatisation of resources, increased extractivism, direct environmental degradation, decline in environmental protection, and urban gentrification (Hadjimichalis, 2014); all in the name of saving the economy.

Documenting the ways in which austerity adds environmental destruction to economic and social destruction is the key aim of this book. By recognising austerity as class politics, the volume documents and analyses the 2008 economic crisis and its consequent austerity practices as initiators of an accentuated environmental, social, and political crisis that lasted (and continues) for more than a decade, and created a new reality that normalises the increased exploitation of resources and human beings, and the intensification of social inequalities and repression across the world and in different socio-political frameworks.

But at the same time, the book also documents how over the past ten years, urban and rural territories all over the world have experienced forms of popular discontent, and the rise of multiple local or supra-local social movements. In many instances, these movements mobilised the 'environment' as a pillar around which they articulated their anti-austerity struggles. By doing so, they exposed the link between environmental degradation and social inequalities under austerity politics, and re-politicised the crisis by enacting novel forms of subaltern and working-class environmentalism. Often, these recent, austerity-driven expressions of class struggle have focused not only on addressing current, specific, and local needs, but also on finding more universal ways of transforming socio-environmental configurations. In few cases, these initiatives have been successful in putting a brake on austerity and its damaging effects on people and the environment. It is, therefore, crucial to investigate the ways in which austerity-driven socio-environmental conflict across geographical locations and scales intersects with class, cultural, gender, anti-colonial, ecological, and political struggles that

have the potential to disrupt uneven and unequal pro-growth policies and ideologies (M'Barek et al., 2020; Tsavdaroglou et al., 2017; Velegrakis & Kosyfologou, 2018).

A political ecology perspective on austerity: Why it matters

Political ecology emerged as a response and opposition to “apolitical” ecologies (Robbins, 2019) and to the rise of “liberal environmentalism” (Bakker, 2015; Heynen et al., 2006). A political ecology approach conveys that the persistent economic exploitation that leads to resource overexploitation and to the current climate crisis is the outcome of who wins and who loses in historically and geographically specific social struggles, political processes, and power relations (Robbins, 2019). Political ecology insists that documenting these process matters in order to understand and show that there are different, often better, less coercive, less exploitative, and more equitable and sustainable ways of ‘doing’ economic development. In short, political ecology understands and researches climate change and environmental degradation as a problem of social struggle, distribution, and the exercise of political and economic power, marked by conflicts over alternative futures and by clashes between alternative values and imaginaries, and amongst groups of different ethnic, class, gender, and other backgrounds.

For political ecology scholars, it is important to historicise and contextualise environmental problems and their interrelation within the socio-economic sphere. This enables us to position environmental problems within their proper historically and geographically particular set of political and economic conditions that include national and international policies, colonial power relations past and present, social conflict, and balance of forces between different sectors in society. Some of the main issues studied in political ecology include the relation between socio-ecological marginalisation and degradation; the causes, characteristics and outcomes of environmental conflicts; the relation between environmental conservation and government control over territories; and the role of social movements in achieving more just and sustainable socio-ecological conditions. In short, political ecology politicises environmental problems in contradistinction to dominant technocratic or apolitical attempts that do not attend to the root causes of such problems.

From a political ecology perspective then, neoliberalism and the related post-2008 economic crisis are co-constituted by evolving relationships with biophysical natures and through a changing society-nature dialectic that involved the changing role of the state in environmental governance, the intensification of geographical dislocation, and social dumping of pollution and toxicity, the construction of CO₂ trading as a market that was supposed to miraculously contribute to solve climate change, the increased commodification, and even financialisation of resources such as water, gas, and electricity (Bakker, 2015; Castree, 2008; Heynen & Robbins, 2005; Heynen et al., 2007; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004).

However, for all its rigour in documenting the relation between neoliberal economies and environmental destruction, political ecology scholarship has thus far not developed a systematic framework for understanding and theorising the link between austerity politics and environmental change. The concept and theory around the continuous use of ‘socio-ecological fixes’ to capitalist crises, which is well developed theoretically and documented empirically, does not help us theorise or understand what happens under conditions of imposed austerity. According to the ‘socio-ecological fix’ thesis, an economic crisis can be temporarily deferred by socialising or displacing environmental problems, or by transforming them into economic opportunities. Examples include ‘green washing’ investment, urban green gentrification practices, bioengineering, privatisation of natural ‘assets’ and environmental management services, and commodification or financialisation of negative environmental externalities (Bakker, 2009; Castree, 2008). In short, socio-ecological fixes respond to ‘crisis’ by boosting accumulation opportunities, usually by rolling-out neoliberal policies in the name of growth or sustainability. Although recent more benign analysis on ‘fixes’ identified prospects for a greener and more socially just capitalism (Castree & Christophers, 2015), existing research shows that most of the time socio-ecological fixes raise inequalities and concerns of socio-environmental justice.

However, the implementation of austerity as a response to an economic crisis carries a different set of social, economic and environmental consequences that have not yet been documented, explained, or theorised. To consider austerity as yet another ‘fix’ would be simplistic, as it would not allow to advance our understanding of the very particular and highly destructive ways in which austerity imposes serious socio-environmental transformations. Setting this debate into motion is one of this book’s key aims.

As noted earlier, the book identifies and examines two key facets of the environmental dimension of austerity: the shift towards more uneven and unequal ‘environmentally’ and ‘socially’ developmental practices; and the proliferation of social movements and initiatives that mobilise environmental issues as a way to resist the class politics of austerity, and in the process produce alternative ways of organising socio-environmental relations.

In examining the first key facet of the environmental dimensions of austerity (intensification of inequality and environmental destruction), the book documents how the post-2008 crisis cuts on social spending, social services, and environmental protection, combined with the renewed emphasis on pro-growth measures, intensified the commodification of environmental resources, expanded extractivism, relaxed regulations on polluting industries and shelved agendas for ‘green’ growth. These dynamics were inseparable from further reducing welfare and the protection of vulnerable populations from environmental and social disasters.

In examining the second key facet of the environmental dimensions of austerity (intensification of social struggles and proliferation of social movements), the book documents how austerity policies gave birth to new and wide-ranging social mobilisations and initiatives that challenge the

intensification of socio–environmental injustices that austerity brings and offer possible alternatives to overcoming the economic crisis through more equitable and ecologically sound ways.

Geographical scope: Environmental destruction beyond the global north/south divide

The book's examination of the two key facets of the environmental consequences of austerity (environmental destruction and inequalities on one hand and proliferation of environmental movements on the other hand) adds nuance to the global north/south dichotomy when it comes to environmental discourses.

The book's debates are empirically grounded in examining the environmental impact of austerity measures implemented primarily in the global north after the economic crisis. However, as Kaika (2012) notes, these practices borrowed their armoury from well-established practices and policies to which the global south had been subjected for many decades. The post-2008 appointment of 'commissioners' to govern the 'ungovernable' European South mirror decades of demands for more technocratic governance in the global south; demands for constitutional changes that prioritise debt servicing over servicing the population's basic needs within Europe (Germany, Greece, Spain, the UK) mimic the way in which servicing debt repayments in the global south had historically been prioritised over servicing the welfare needs of the local population (Kaika, 2012). Seeing western austerity practices in this light, the book offers a more nuanced and detailed analysis on how austerity politics employed repeatedly in the past in the global south, and more recently in the global north as a blanket response to the post-2008 economic crisis, resulted in unsettling further the pre-determined strict dichotomy between the global north and the global south.

This way, although offering a comprehensive north/south comparative lies beyond the scope of this book, the book does add sophistication to the 'north' 'south' debate on capitalist crisis, austerity and the remaking of the environment (Acosta, 2013; Brand et al., 2016; Gudynas, 2013; Lander, 2018; Svampa, 2015). It offers a novel analytical framework for understanding the relationship between economic crisis, austerity, and the environmental crisis that can open the possibility for more nuanced global comparative research in the future. Such an analysis, we argue, would need to go beyond conventional contrasting comparatives that simply emphasise and duplicate standardised north/south dichotomies. This resonates with recent more sophisticated analysis which argues there are several 'norths' within the 'global north' and several 'souths' within the 'global south' (Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014).

Structure and chapters

The book is structured in four parts, each addressing a key aspect of the environmental dimension of austerity. The first part explores the role of the politics of austerity in transforming cities and urban planning, and in incrementing

environmental degradation and disasters. In this part, the chapter by Greig Charnock, Hug March, and Ramon Ribera-Fumaz on “Austerity and the rebel city: The right to the (smart) city in Barcelona” sheds light into the interlinks between austerity urbanism and the promotion of the ‘Barcelona Model’ of smart city in the post-2008 crisis.

Zoe Holman’s chapter, “On a thought and a prayer: Austerity, climate denialism and disaster in neoliberal Australia”, focuses on the bushfires disaster in 2019 in Australia, also known as the ‘Black Summer’, to examine how austerity measures have combined with economic growth based on fossil fuels industry, denial of climate change, and colonialism to exacerbate climate-related disasters and the country’s unpreparedness to face them.

The second part of the book scrutinises how austerity politics can intensify the impact of environmental change on marginalised people by intensifying colonial, racist, class-based, and exclusionary imaginaries, discourses, and practices. In his chapter, “The coloniality of austerity: On crisis, finance, and Indigenous resistance in British Columbia’s forests”, Michael Ekers illustrates how austerity is constituted and contested in a settler-colonial context. Ekers examines the austerity-driven financialisation of forest land in Indigenous territories as a socio-ecological ‘fix’ to the economic crisis, revealing how austerity projects are also colonial ones; in this light, Indigenous struggles against land enclosure take part of, but also move beyond, anti-austerity politics.

Carmen Leidereiter’s chapter on “When disaster meets austerity: Environmental inequality and historical injustice during crisis” shows that austerity selective cuts in flood protection, combined with a long history of uneven infrastructural distribution and classed risk discrimination, in the industrial region of Ave in Northern Portugal, created the conditions for working class communities to suffer the 2016 floods disaster disproportionately. In the midst of disaster and injustices, the author also identifies emergent forms of working-class environmentalism.

The chapter of Panagiota Kotsila and Giorgos Kallis, “Narratives of blame and racist biopolitics as tactics of austerity politics” scrutinises the malaria epidemics in Greece after the onset of the post-2008 economic crisis. The authors clearly demonstrate how a racist biopolitics of austerity enabled the conditions to malaria’s spread not only by restricting health budgets but also through a stigmatising discourse against immigrants, who were mostly the victims of this epidemic.

The third part addresses the rise of environmental conflict in the context of austerity and how the environment informs anti-austerity struggles and mobilizations. The chapter by Giorgos Velegrakis, Rita Calvário, and Maria Kaika on “The politicised ecologies of austerity: Anti-austerity environmentalism during and after the Greek crisis” focuses on three disparate environmental conflicts and movements emerging in crisis-ridden Greece, one responding to increasing food poverty, other struggling against extractivist plans through a gold-mine project, and the third against the hydrocarbon explorations all over Greece, to shed light on how struggles over the environment can become the focal point around which austerity as the hegemonic response to crisis can be contested.

Diana Vela-Almeida, Angus Lyall, Geovanna Lasso and Diego Andreucci's chapter, "Resisting austerity in the era of COVID-19: Between nationwide mobilisation and decentralised organising in Ecuador", examines the re-scaling of anti-austerity protests and organising amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador through a focus on anti-extractivist and agroecological collectives in the Andes. In this country, the neoliberal government since 2017 is imposing an austerity agenda to renew extractivism and is using the context of the pandemic in attempts to further this project while silencing anti-austerity activism.

Antonio Maria Pusceddu's chapter on "Political ecologies of value: Austerity politics and environmental conflicts in the Italian South" analyzes the intensification of environmental conflicts in the post-2008 economic crisis in an industrial city in South-Eastern Italy and sheds light on how those conflicts shifted from the sphere of production to that of social reproduction, opposing non-capitalist valuation frameworks to the logic of accumulation.

The fourth part documents new forms of socio-environmental solidarity emerging in response to austerity measures as well as how they evolved in post-austerity times. Eduardo Ascensão and Franklin Ginn on their chapter, "Urban gardening and post-austerity in Lisbon: Between subaltern urbanism and green gentrification", focus on the evolution of urban gardening in the city of Lisbon during and after the post-2008 economic crisis. The authors expose the diversity of urban gardens in lines of class and race, tracing their differentiated geographies and genealogies, identifying a conflict between subaltern urbanism developed prior and in response to austerity politics and state-led processes of green gentrification in the post-austere neoliberal city through urban gardening.

The chapter by Elia Apostolopoulou on "Community gardening and the geographies of everyday lives in the city: Reclaiming the urban commons in austerity Greece" looks into the rise of community gardens in Athens, Greece, as ways of contesting the politics of austerity, the housing crisis, and the loss of green spaces and places in post-crisis European mega-cities, to shed light on the role of these grassroots initiatives in reclaiming the right to the city.

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