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# Austerity beyond the budget cut: experiences of austerity urbanism by disadvantaged urban youth

**Sander van Lanen**

In 2008 the Celtic Tiger died. It could no longer feed on ever-increasing property prices and easy accessible credit, and thus the imagery of an ever-growing wealth-producing beast ceased to be for the population of Ireland. Already starving from the deflation of a home-grown property bubble, the international financial crisis killed it for good (O’Riain, 2014). Of course there were attempts to save or regenerate it. In 2008, the proposed budget aimed to keep economic growth going through productive borrowing aimed at stimulating the economy and attempts to protect the poor and vulnerable. However, ever since the sole focus of crisis-resolution politics has been on protecting, stimulating and restoring the economy as the vital pre-condition for jobs, prosperity and welfare. In this context, Ireland has seen a blanket bank guarantee, the establishment of ‘bad bank’ NAMA (National Asset Management Association), and finally the conditional bailout package from the tripartite committee of the European Committee, the International Monetary fund, and the European Central Bank, also known as the Troika (Fraser, Murphy, & Kelly, 2013).

To cope with the costs of such attempts, to ‘balance the books’ after using public money to secure liquidity, buy distressed property, and pay for increasing social welfare bills among skyrocketing unemployment, a regime of fierce austerity was implemented in the Republic of Ireland. The implementation of these measures was both domestically motivated and conditioned by the troika bailout package. In order to rebalance state budget and to regenerate the economy, spending on social welfare and public service provision were slashed while revenue was generated through increased direct and indirect taxes and the introduction and increase of service fees (Allen & O’Boyle, 2013). Austerity, via various avenues, infiltrated the everyday spaces of urban life in Ireland.

Poor and marginalised groups were specifically affected by austerity because of their higher dependence on state spending and public services (Peck, 2012). For example, funding for the community and voluntary sector was reduced by 35% between 2008 and 2012 (Harvey, 2012), public sector wages were cut several times, including a temporary reduction of the general minimum wage (Hardiman & Regan, 2013), and social welfare payments were lowered, most significantly for youth aged under 25. As a result, from 2008 to 2011, consistent poverty rose from 4.2% to 6.9% of the population, while in the same period people living with at least two types of enforced deprivation<sup>1</sup> rose from 13.8% to 24.5% (Fraser et al., 2013). Recently, the amount of homeless people has more than doubled between December 2014 and December 2017 (Ireland, 2018). It is thus clear that austerity and recession resulted in declining and stagnant standards of living for large parts of the Irish population. However,

Sander van Lanen is a lecturer in human geography and planning at the faculty of spatial sciences, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. In 2017, he finished his doctoral thesis, titled ‘Youth, Austerity and the City’ at University College Cork on the experiences of austerity by disadvantaged urban youth from Cork and Dublin, Ireland. Taking experiences of austerity by young adults aged 18 to 25 as the starting point, the aim was to illuminate the pathways through which austerity emerges in everyday life, the types of spaces and places it creates and how it transformed the spatial relations of young adults from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. He is currently looking to further develop his approach towards everyday emergence of structural transformations.

the pre-crisis urban condition in Ireland cannot, and should not, be glamorised. Deprivation already existed and the fruits of the free market were not shared equally or equitably among the Irish population. Although general welfare levels were rising during the Celtic Tiger, there was no convergence between groups of varying levels of affluence (Haase, 2007). It is, therefore, a social and political mistake to portray the Celtic Tiger as a situation to which a return would be desirable. It is thus important to consider the developments of austerity urbanism as a way of life both quantitatively and qualitatively. Indicators of poverty clearly show its increase, both in the number of people living in poverty and the actual amount of money the poor receive. What is maybe less apparent is if, and how, there has been a qualitative shift in the urban condition. That is, has there been a change in the underlying processes that generate wealth and deprivation, to what extent do these processes differ from the Celtic Tiger, and how are these experienced by urban inhabitants living in areas of concentrated deprivation?

It has been argued that the austerity response is an attempt to recover from a crisis of neoliberalism by the implementation of even more neoliberalism (Aalbers, 2013). Ongoing

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privatisations, looser labour market regulations, and stricter social welfare rules – both in regard to income and conditions of eligibility – support this argument of sacrific-

ing the power and remuneration of labour in pursuit of uninterrupted generation of profit. Yes, these processes intensified under austerity, creating a harsher lived reality, but to claim a qualitative change in the production and reproduction of urban life can be questioned. The implementation of more neoliberalism implies more of the same, more intense – yes, more poverty – yes, but new processes of poverty creation – this remains to be seen.

To stop here and claim that, because no alternative to neoliberal urbanism arose, there has been no shift towards a different urban condition is, however, short-sighted. The city, and urban life, does not solely consist of the rhythms of capital accumulation, although these are very important. The experience of city life also matters (Tuan, 1977), and this is shaped by discourses, interactions, and the underpinning cultural systems of meaning making that guide the interpretation of cities and life within them (Buttimer, 1976). It is in these spheres that, at least in the case of Ireland, the contours of austerity urbanism can be identified.

And indeed, it is in the experiences and stories of disadvantaged urban youth that a break can be found. Over the year 2015, I interviewed youth aged 18 to 25 from the neighbourhoods Knocknaheeny in Cork and Ballymun in Dublin, both areas of concentrated deprivation among the most disadvantaged in their respective cities. Their experiences relate to increased unfairness, related to heightened manifestations of inequality, or to higher visibility of inequality-generating policies in times of austerity compared to the previous Celtic Tiger era of relative prosperity. But these experiences also reflect changing interpretations of the city, shifting policy discourses, the delivery of various services, and transforming uses of city spaces.

In direct relation to poverty and income, one of such experiences is precarity. Although labour precarity is nothing new, its experience depends on the availability of replacement work (Benanav, 2015). Losing a job is not as devastating if you can walk straight into the next one. However, in a situation of long, protracted unemployment, the precarity-experience becomes one of uncertainty and vulnerability. This is even more the case in a context of tightened social welfare conditionality and lower social welfare rates. Conditionality, furthermore, is increasingly punitive. Welfare payments can be significantly reduced when a 'client' does

not accept work, training or does not sufficiently engage with the activation process (Dean, 1995). Such pressure means especially youth is forced to accept increasingly precarious work while, under internship schemes like JobBridge, employers can receive tax benefits or labour free-of-charge. Such reforms and transformations in the provision of social welfare and labour activation increasingly illuminates the divide between employer and employee, between the economy and personal well-being felt in the urban every-day in the context of austerity.

Furthermore, cultural changes during the Celtic Tiger simultaneously presented an ideal of hedonistic consumption and a constant pressure on educational and professional achievement (Tovy & Share, 2003). Disadvantaged youth already struggled to establish personal meaning as their socio-economic status clashed with the increased importance of consumption for identity. Under austerity, stable employment, or any employment at all, further disappeared from the opportunities that Irish cities could offer such youth. Such disconnect between presented ideal and lived reality was thus felt even stronger among participants. Young people – who came of age in an era that portrayed work, buying a house, and consumption as the elements assembling the ‘good citizen’ (McGuigan, 2016) – saw the attainment of such ideals further removed from their possibilities under austerity urbanism. If identity and meaning, created in such context, are conceptualised relationally, it illuminates the disruptive experience of the socio-economic transformations in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and how it might invoke feelings of exclusion and abandonment.

Similar transformations in the urban experience unfolded in service provision and the access to facilities. During the economic growth of the Celtic Tiger, rising revenue streams based, among others, on property taxes, provided funding possibilities for the community and voluntary sector. The development and professionalization of youth work following the Youth Work Act 2001 provided services that benefitted self-esteem, community ties and the personal and professional development of especially disadvantaged youth (Lalor, de Róiste, & Devlin, 2007). Although competitive and conditional funding mechanisms incorporated a managerial and entrepreneurial culture in social services, economic prosperity provided an expanding array of services and facilities. Thus, it could be felt, economic growth enabled at least some provision for disadvantaged parts of the population, leading to a perceived form of inclusion.

However, under austerity this dynamic drastically changed. Previously supported by economic growth, community and voluntary services were sacrificed to restore state finances. Available funding for these sectors was slashed, even in comparison to other austerity measures (Harvey, 2012). As a result, services and facilities available to youth from deprived urban neighbourhoods reduced their services and opening times or had to close completely. Simultaneously, some private facilities left such areas as disposable income fell and they thus no longer generate satisfactory profit. Such decline in available services heightened feelings of exclusion felt by youth from Knocknaheeny and Ballymun, which became deprived of opportunities of leisure and personal development (van Lanen, 2017). Public services previously made possible by economic growth were now sacrificed to assist a restarting economy, another element and clear indication experienced as the continuous privileging of the economy over social issues and well-being of the population.

Combined, such developments led to a reappraisal of scalar relations among research participants (Marston, Jones III, & Woodward, 2005). In their perception, the national scale no longer took its responsibility by providing support for the smaller scale; the local scale of

the neighbourhood. This reappraisal shows the experiential nature of the shift into austerity urbanism, as it reveals an active comparison with previous social economic contexts which contained, in the eyes of these youth, more fair scalar relationships. Such expectations, where the national scale should support the local scale, opposed official narratives where the local scale should support national economic recovery through a discourse of each doing their bit and sharing the burden. This mismatch between expected and perceived scalar responsibility affected sense of place and belonging in relation to both the local and the national scale. The shift from the Celtic Tiger to austerity, thus, affected spatial experience and the meaning that neighbourhood, city and country hold for disadvantaged urban youth.

Taking into account these lived experiences of austerity urbanism, it becomes clear that it is not a mere continuation of neoliberal urbanism. Less than a politics of crisis, crisis was the opening and beginning of a new era of politics. A politics which matches the previous period in its aims and operations, but stands apart in its justifications and intensity with which it is executed. No longer discursively and experientially able to produce wealth and benefit for all, the vulnerable recovery is not able to spread enthusiasm and feelings of potential inclusion to deprived urban neighbourhoods. For disadvantaged urban youth, it became clear that their future is increasingly foreclosed in the service of the national economy and continuation of neoliberal politics. They are not only excluded from stable work, affordable housing and vital services, their experiences are also often excluded from the Irish success story of austerity. Therefore, contemporary economic growth cannot become a Celtic Phoenix. In the context of austerity, politics became barer, lost its pretences. Now, to reflect the words of the communist manifesto, austerity urbanism faces youth with the real conditions of the neoliberal epoch.

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