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Planning amid crisis and austerity: in, against and beyond the contemporary conjuncture

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue ‘Planning amid crisis and austerity: in, against and beyond the contemporary juncture’. It starts by acknowledging two limits of the existing body of literature on the planning/crisis/austerity nexus: on the one hand, the excessive

reliance on cases at the 'core' of the financial crisis of 2007-8, with impacts on the understanding of austerity as a response to economic crises; and, on the other, the limited attention given to the impacts of austerity on planning, and their implications for planning practice and research. Based on the contributions in the special issue, the article reflects on some lessons learned: first, the need for a more nuanced understanding of the multiple geographies and temporalities of crisis and austerity; second, the problematic standing of planning practice and research in the face of crisis and austerity; and, third, the potential and limitations of (local) responses and grassroots mobilisations in shaping alternatives.

Keywords: spatial planning; austerity politics; geographies of crisis; anti-austerity movements; planning research.

Crisis and austerity in, against and beyond the contemporary conjuncture

Crisis denoted the turning point of a disease, a critical phase in which life or death was at stake and called for an irrevocable decision (Roitman, 2014, 15).

Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. It may be that society moves on to another version of the same thing...or to a somewhat transformed version...or relations can be radically transformed (Hall and Massey, 2010, 57).

Despite being an old idea with a very rich history, austerity has captured global public attention as the dominant political response to the 2007-08 economic crises, turning the

failures of financial capitalism into an acute crisis of the state (Hall and Massey, 2010). By opportunistically imposing new forms of discipline on public service provision, particularly in economically peripheral locations like Southern Europe and already weak welfare systems like the United States, austerity programmes served to intensify prevailing neoliberal orthodoxies about the proper role of the state and the market in society (Hadjimichalis, 2011; Blyth, 2013).

More than ten years on from the collapse of the Wall Street banks, and long after most mainstream commentators have consigned the economic crisis to history, austerity retains its political grip on states across the global north (Annunziata and Mattiucci, 2017; Davies, 2017). However, there is growing evidence that the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2010) underpinning the promise of austerity, that short-term pain is the only path to future prosperity, has been exposed and rings increasingly hollow. Various discontents with the dominant order are now finding political expression through the rise of new forms of politics, whether the multiplication of protests or the rise of populist parties. The current historical moment seems to echo Antonio Gramsci’s ([1971] 2005, 275-276) sense of a prolonged crisis that ‘consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’ Amidst the morbid symptoms of the present interregnum and the profound political uncertainties they are generating, it seems more vital than ever to generate critical debate about the nature of crises and austerity politics and, international planning studies, their complex relationships to planning and urban development.

Such themes are, of course, not new to planning scholarship (Clavel et al., 1980). Research and theory in the field have developed important accounts of the complicity of planning processes in the production of a financial crisis with significant roots in speculative cycles of

real estate investment (Lovering, 2009; Weber, 2015). Studies have explored the transformation of planning practices in times of crisis and stress (Grange, 2014; Knieling and Othengrafen, 2016; Ponzini, 2016), and how they have been reshaped by neoliberal governmentalities (Haughton, Allmendinger and Oosterlynck, 2013; Tulumello, 2016; Standring, 2019) with planning regulations frequently becoming a ‘neoliberal scapegoat’ for the crisis (Gunder, 2016).

However, there are reasons to believe that planning scholars' response to the crisis has remained limited (Siemiatycki and Siemiatycki, 2016). This is particularly problematic when the dominant planning response in many of those places most affected has been to restore or even enhance the very market-led development dynamics that generated the 2007-08 economic crisis in the first place. Such planning approaches are mortgaged into financialised assumptions of urban growth that generate hard-to-control waves of speculation in vibrant economies whilst offering little hope to less favoured locations.

From this perspective, this special issue aims to further debate and build knowledge about the effects of crisis and/or austerity on planning ideas and practices. In doing so we hope to develop understanding of the possibilities for acting in and against the present political conjuncture (see also Standring, 2019; Inch and Shepherd, forthcoming), considering whether and how local practices and politics can build sustained and scalable alternatives to global trends.

To assist in this task, we felt it was important to develop a more complex and nuanced account of the interrelations between crisis dynamics, austerity and the politics of planning and urban development. Ponzini's summary (2016; see also Cotella et al., 2016) of the bidirectional relationship between planning and the 2007-08 financial crisis offers an important starting point, recognising planning as one of the causes of a crisis with deep roots

in urbanisation, real estate and construction but also the ways in which this, in turn, generated pressures to reform planning systems and processes, intensifying rather than challenging the structural dominance of neoliberal governmentalities and pro-growth approaches in (European) planning (see also Oosterlynck and González 2013). However, this still leaves a number of blind spots for deepening understanding of planning amid crisis and austerity.

First, the analysis relies on cases located in a relatively small number of places – above all, Europe, and particularly contexts like the UK and Southern Europe – mostly during a particular time-frame, that is, the aftermath of the so-called ‘Great Recessions’ post-2008. These spatial and temporal coordinates risk promoting a mono-dimensional understanding of the complex and varied ways in which crisis/austerity have been bundled together with planning. For example, they overlook contexts where crisis has been captured not so much to impose austerity but to more straightforwardly deepen existing (neoliberal) governmentalities, as in Miessner’s account of Germany in this volume.

A further consequence of this dominant focus is that austerity has rarely been explored in its own right, instead being seen as a direct ‘response’ to (a particular set of) crisis dynamics – and their political interpretation (cf. Roitman, 2014). This is all too correct when applied to Southern European countries undergoing external bailouts after 2008, but not necessarily of countries that have experienced rapid economic development like South Korea (see Potter and Kim in this volume); or contexts, like Brazil (Andrade, 2002 [1981]; Di Bella in this volume) or the USA (McGahey, 2013; Saija, Santo and Raciti in this volume), where austerity has been core to a longer-standing political economy, largely disconnected from phases of boom and bust.

Finally, and rather differently, even in research focusing on the ‘usual suspects’, that is, the countries where austerity has been presented as ‘new’ strategy post-2008, there has still

been relatively little discussion of the concrete ways in which planning reforms have been carried out, the actors involved and the (explicit/implicit) objectives sought. Research has, for instance, largely overlooked the role of the European Union and other supra-national institutions (see Tulumello, Cotella and Othengrafen in this volume).

By bringing together a more geographically and temporally diverse set of perspectives, this special issue therefore seeks to expand existing horizons and generate new insights into the ways crises and austerity interact with planning.

Whilst arguing that greater attention should be paid to diverse, context dependent crisis/austerity trajectories, however, we do not argue that every crisis, each instance of austerity policy/politics, and their relations to planning can *only* be understood in their own specificity. Rather, we suggest that a full, in-depth exploration of these specific dynamics need to be taken as the basis for more and stronger global theorising on the planning/crisis/austerity bundle. Indeed, we believe the papers collected in this volume allow us to advance some significant theoretical claims on both the global nature of crisis/austerity and their implications for planning.

Lessons learned: the geographies of crisis/austerity and implications for planning

Following the argument above, a key point concerns the geographies and temporalities of crisis/austerity and involves tracing commonalities across the forms of austerity imposed by international institutions in the Global South during the 1980s and 1990s, US-style, long-term, self-inflicted ‘austerity urbanism’ (see Peck 2012) and EU-imposed austerity in Southern European countries.

Foucault (2003 [1997], 103) famously argued that colonisation had ‘a considerable boomerang effect on the mechanisms of power in the West, and on the apparatuses, institutions, and techniques of power. A whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could practice something resembling colonization, or an internal colonialism, on itself.’ Following Cappuccini (in this volume), one such boomerang effect links the experimentations of austerity in the Global South with the recent austerity agenda in Greece: in both instances, (economic) crisis was used to justify the imposition of a violent and socially divisive neoliberal agenda. This is an observation that could easily be extended to encompass the rest of Southern Europe post-2008 (see Tulumello et al. in this volume), but also, and perhaps more surprisingly, to Germany, where the ‘exceptional’ situation of crisis has been used to justify the imposition of new forms of discipline that disproportionately influence peripheral regions, deepening strategies of development-cum-inequality (Miessner in this volume). As Potter and Kim argue, following Ong (2007), these examples show austerity operating as a mobile political technology or ‘logic of governing’ capable of adapting to diverse contexts. Although operating on somewhat different temporal horizons to the post-2008 European experience, this logic of governing can be extended across the Korean example Potter and Kim address, Saija and colleagues’ account of Memphis, and Di Bella’s of Brazil elsewhere in this issue. This commonality across diverse sites further illustrates how (global) crises can, and frequently do, generate powerful pressures for convergence toward specific (here neoliberal, capitalist) governmental responses.

The papers in this issue also contribute to debates on the impacts of the crisis/austerity bundle on planning systems and practices in several important ways. First, they add to the body of literature that has associated austerity with the ‘neoliberalisation’ of planning in

Europe, whether in ‘economically-wise’ Germany or ‘spendthrift’ Southern Europe, at both the national and local scales – see the contributions by Miessner, Tulumello and colleagues, Cappuccini, and Rossini and Bianchi. More than that, drawing on evidence from across Southern Europe, Tulumello and colleagues suggest that austerity-driven planning has effectively created the conditions for a new round of economic growth centred on real estate and construction: conveniently overlooking any acknowledgement of the role of liberalised planning in creating the 2007-08 financial crisis, austerity governmentalities and their associated planning approaches may be paving the way for a new crisis to strike even harder.

Contributions to this issue from non-European experiences show quite different prospects and trajectories. On one side, are places where governmental social spending has, at least until recently, remained possible and appears compatible with crisis recovery (e.g. Potter and Kim’s account of South Korea). On the other side, are places where austerity was already well established before the 2007-08 crisis, to such an extent that attempts to intensify its logics in response to the crisis may even have opened up new opportunities for counter-action, whether at the level of civil society (as in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil; see Di Bella) or of local institutions (as in the mid-sized US city of Memphis, see Saija et al.).

Taken as a whole, the papers here also illustrate the challenges of scale that are central to any consideration of how normatively oriented planning theory and practice should respond to the crisis/austerity bundle, raising important questions about the possibilities and political strategies required to pursue alternative strategies. What, for example, are the prospects of an inherently ‘local’ practice like planning to pursue progressive change in increasingly market-led environments?

The aftermath of the Global Recession has witnessed a flourishing of local attempts to counter the powerful forces of capitalist urbanisation, through, on the one hand, grassroots organisation to reclaim urban spaces or push alternative planning approaches (see Rossini and Bianchi; Di Bella in this volume) and, on the other, new municipalisms and networks of cities (see Tulumello et al. in this volume). However, such ‘new localisms’ always run the risk of being little more than a form of escapism from global challenges whether migration, refuge, climate change or the global convergence of governmentalities around crisis/austerity (Purcell, 2009; Tulumello 2019).

This last point is of particular interest for those who believe that, within the broad family of urban studies, planning research should also provide inspiration for action. Amidst widespread concerns about the increasing contraction of opportunities to plan and spend for the ‘public good’ in our cities and regions, planning scholars wonder what can or should be done about it. In this regard, our authors explore the challenges and opportunities of action arising from a variety of nexus (the local vs. the national, the civic vs. the institutional, the old way vs. the new way). Many of these are in line with a long-standing scholarly tradition that studies the planning relevance of extra-institutional practices, providing renewed evidence of the importance of social mobilisation and civic self-organisation in developing local anti-austerity and anti-neoliberal plans (e.g. Di Bella; Rossini and Bianchi) and, in general, in keeping ‘institutions honest’ (Potter and Kim). Other authors suggest the limitations of relying on civic initiatives in opposition to austerity; whether due to their fragmentary nature (Tulumello et al.), their weakness within societies characterised by long-standing anti-governmental cultures (Saija et al.), or the ability of neoliberal forces to co-opt, neutralise or marginalise civic practices, however radical they are (Rossini and Bianchi; Cappucinni). All of the papers, in their own ways suggest the importance of critically

assessing the true scale of the challenges planners face whilst seeking to locate and build sources of political and practical support for alternative ways of working.

It is not the goal of a special issue – especially one that brings together such a rich variety of voices and perspectives – to identify a few, specific recommendations for planning research nor to suggest a singular course for planning practice. However, we feel this collection of articles does offer a powerful provocation to the scholarly community to rethink, renew and enhance the social relevance of planning research in the aftermath of the crisis. This issue is therefore a showcase for researchers’ ability to develop critical thinking at the intersections between global finance, the power of ‘governing logics’ to reshape legal and institutional frameworks and their, often stark, implications for local struggles for quality of life. By developing understanding, and critique, we hope the papers gathered here contribute toward an overall enhancement of our ability to respond to the unfolding crises of the contemporary conjuncture.

Contributions to the Special Issue

In the first of our papers, Cuz Potter and Jeeyeop Kim illustrate the value of looking beyond the heartlands of the crisis/austerity narrative of the past ten years. Focusing on South Korea, they contrast the neoliberal technology of austerity with the role played by a developmental state in building capabilities over the previous sixty years, responding to a series of crises through fiscal stimulus and increases in public spending. Provocatively concluding that austerity is development in reverse, they argue if ‘development represents a movement toward the flourishing of every individual’s capabilities and generally entails an expansion of social spending. Neo-liberal austerity in practice has moved in the opposite

direction: by cutting social spending, it has diminished capabilities through the deterioration of health, education, security, and so forth' (10-11). Highlighting the centrality of housing provision to the legitimation of the Korean growth model and how more recent experimentation with neoliberal technologies has increased housing inequalities and thereby diminished some capabilities, they point to and the importance of democratic social movements in building pressure to 'maintain the social spending that expands combined capabilities' (12).

The recent emergence of Rio de Janeiro in the panorama of global cities is at the centre of Arturo Di Bella's article. Di Bella builds on the work of Milton Santos, a Brazilian geographer who developed sophisticated theories of globalism and urbanism from a Southern perspective long before post-colonial critique took centre stage in academic discussions (see Melgaço and Prousek, 2017). In particular, the article adopts Santos' understanding of globalisation as a fable (ideology), perversity (a multiplier of inequalities and injustices) and possibility (for emancipation) to explore the cycles of capitalist boom and bust as they are made concrete in mega-event planning, understood as a linking chain between urbanism and globalism. In this way, Di Bella explores the connections between neoliberal global experimentation and the specific character of the Brazilian developmental state. This includes the significant role of crisis and austerity in imposing 'turbo-charged forms' of neoliberalism – dubbed an 'ultra-liberal inflection' by Luiz Cesar de Queiroz Ribeiro (2018) in its latest instalments – but also the emergence of a civil society capable of imagining and building alternatives.

Laura Saija, Charles Santo, and Antonio Raciti question the centrality of 2007 economic crisis to austere planning in the US context. The authors view the effects of the recession against a long history of market-serving planning that has already created a vacuum of the

public. In cities like Memphis, socio-spatial gaps are so old and extreme that the crisis has almost had a paradoxical anti-austerity effect: prompting private and philanthropic interests to lead the call for a new comprehensive planning process and a revived public planning function. The authors discuss the many contradictions that this gives rise to whilst also identifying signs of authentic interest in public planning. The paper as argues that researchers need to capture these signs as a starting point for new anti-austere courses of action.

Back in Europe, Michael Miessner explores the German case, perhaps the least likely site for considerations of the crisis/austerity/planning nexus since the economic crisis was apparently ‘fixed’ much more rapidly there than anywhere else on the continent. This does not imply that its impacts have not been felt, however. Adopting an historical materialist perspective, Miessner shows how German planners and politicians captured the crisis to double down on previously existing patterns of neoliberalisation, namely the fostering of regional competition and the promotion of metropolitan regions, intensifying patterns of regional and spatial inequality. This resonates with studies on the adoption and continuation of austerity measures to discipline German labour long before the financial and economic crisis (Keller, 2014). By analysing the discussions and decisions of the German parliament, that is, the political dimension of the process, the paper provides an example of the working of a crisis as a ‘discursive device’ (cf. Roitman, 2014).

Simone Tulumello, Giancarlo Cotella and Frank Othengrafen also focus on national-level planning changes, bringing us to the Southern European ‘core’ of the recent crisis, where its urban and territorial consequences have been deeply felt (see Knieling and Othengrafen, 2016). Despite the vast literature produced in and on the crisis/austerity/city nexus in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, Tulumello and colleagues argue, not much has been said about the planning side of the equation, especially at the national and supra-national scale.

This article therefore explores the reforms that have restructured planning systems and territorial governance arrangements in these countries during the years of crisis and austerity, questioning the role of the EU in the process. Borrowing from an expression developed in the field of housing studies, the article shows how a ‘stealth’ housing policy for Southern Europe has been embedded within the EU austerity agenda. This is a contradictory policy that, by creating the conditions for a new round of accumulation-by-urbanisation, risks reproducing the very conditions that created the crisis in the first place. At the same time, showing some of the local responses to reforms, they argue for an understanding of planning and territorial governance as a political space open to contestation, conflict and possibly transformation.

Staying in Southern Europe, Monia Cappuccini takes us on a tour around austerity Athens, a symbolically important ‘laboratory’ for testing debt policies in the period from 2010 to 2015. Drawing on extended periods of field research, Cappuccini explores various sites where public planning and provision were subject to privatisation and others where new forms of bio-political and social control were imposed to manage the political unrest created by the crisis and the social conflicts it generated. Following Souliotis and Kandyliis (2013), and Peck (2012) she argues that this dual agenda represents a particular form of governmentality, the ‘auste-city’, which she defines as an ‘exportable and reproducible pattern’, whose main aim is normalizing a form of rule made up of emergency-cum-crisis.

Finally, Luisa Rossini and Iolanda Bianchi compare recent conflicts between the grassroots and local authorities over three vacant urban locations: the Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, the former Snia factory turned into an artificial lake in Rome and the old industrial complex Can Batlló in Barcelona. These are three cases of large urban spaces where grassroots groups have organised to oppose attempts to privatise public assets through radical

spatial practices. This paper shows how civic collective action can – in more or less open contrast with ‘austere’ local authorities – generate alternative models of socio-economic governance. However, it also discusses the high risk of cooptation of radical practices by neoliberal forces and shows how difficult is for the grassroots, no matter how successful their efforts is, to permanently and structurally affect the governing logics underpinning urban agendas.

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The authors declare they have no conflict of interest regarding the content of this article.

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