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Austerity and (spatial) rights

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“And who was left to deal with it? The police”: reflecting on permanent, low-intensity austerity in Memphis

Simone Tulumello

You know, our jails are probably our biggest mental health facilities. [...] In the 60s and 70s [...] we shut down state hospitals all over the country, the state hospitals for the mental ill. [...] The idea was that we would replace the state hospitals with a comprehensive network of community mental health centers. Well, what we did was we shut down hospitals but never provided that kind of funding community mental health centers needed. So, the mental ill became the homeless, they became any number of things. And who was left to deal with it? The police and the correction system were said: “Solve this problem.”

[Interviewer] Which of course you eventually don't solve through police.

You don't solve it¹

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This interview excerpt encapsulates two ideas I will elaborate in this essay. First, while austerity is often conceptualized as a sort of acute “response” to any number of crises, more often economic ones, there are places where austerity is a permanent, if low-intensity, reality. Memphis is one such place. Second, while austerity is often equated to state roll-back, I believe it is rather a multiform—variegated, as Neil Brenner and colleagues (2010) would put it—process by which state action is restructured and geared to pursue specific political goals. Austerity as a (long-term) governmental strategy is particularly evident in Memphis.

Memphis, a middle-sized city at the south-western corner of the US state of Tennessee, is one of those places that have remained at the “borderlands” of urban theorization (Baptista, 2013; Tulumello, 2017). Not only is Memphis understudied, but its experience, and more generally those of southern US cities, allow to add some nuances to our understanding of current patterns and trends of urbanization. The South of the USA, because of its historical “under-development” (when compared to other US regions), has long been considered a peripheral and marginal region, the “backward”, “persistent”, “dumb” South². However, a few works have recently discussed how the South of the USA in general, and Memphis in particular, are rather places at the core of globalization and neoliberalization (Rushing, 2009; Lloyd, 2012). Indeed, the case of urban security—in American English, public safety—policymaking shows how profoundly have globalization and neoliberalization impacted local policy and politics (Tulumello, 2017; 2018). It is through the lenses of the case of urban security policy that I shall reflect on permanent, low-intensity austerity in Memphis—and

¹ Excerpt from an interview with a retired professor of criminology and former consultant of Memphis Police Department, March 2016, Memphis.

² The way rhetorical labels attached to some Western regions resonate with those historically used for the so-called “Third World” is a topic that would deserve much discussion.

beyond. With low-intensity austerity I refer to something quite different from the shock “austerity urbanism” depicted by Jeremy Peck (2012). Peck’s most important contribution to understanding austerity is, in my opinion, his ability to conceptualize it as a “long established trait of neoliberal governance” (ibidem, 626), indeed a permanent one. However, Peck’s analysis rests on a number of cases—the quintessential example being Detroit, Michigan—where austerity’s face has been that of an “extreme economy” (ibidem), made up of dramatic, and sudden, local government capacity roll-back. While there are many such cases around the urban USA, one can hardly consider Peck’s austerity urbanism the new normal, the geography of municipal austerity being quite complex in space and time (see, e.g., Lobao and Adua, 2011; Donald et al., 2014). The case of Memphis exemplifies a different pattern of urban austerity, one which not only seems to me to be more diffused than Peck’s extreme economy, but is also useful to think the deep nature of austerity. In what follows, I shall discuss two dimensions useful to capture Memphis-style austerity, its movements of resource shifting and its multi-scalar embeddedness within the US institutional arrangements.

If one takes a superficial look at city budgets, they would probably not consider austerity a much useful concept to analyze policymaking in Memphis. Indeed, Memphis city budget has not been shrinking in time. During the last decade or so, for instance, despite some up-and-downs, the city budget remained overall stable; and even the post-financial-crisis drop has been recovered (Tulumello, 2018). A more careful analysis, however, shows that there are two budget items that have been constantly growing, police and fire services, while all the others, including urban and social policy, have been shrinking. I have elsewhere suggested that it is at the intersection of national political transformations, global neoliberalisation trends and multi-scalar institutional relations that these shifts should be understood (Tulumello, 2017). The central place that “safety” has historically had in the US political discourse is well-known (e.g. Kahan 2011). In particular, the end of the New Deal Consensus has brought about a progressive shift of national political cultures away from welfare and toward crime control (Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007). This has walked hand in hand with the affirmation of neoliberal ideas and the ensuing transformation of policymaking. In line with the contradictory nature of neoliberal governmentalities, this has meant a double movement in the field of public safety: in line with ideas about personal responsibility and “empowerment”, the emergence of prevention partnerships and the expectation that citizens would take responsibility for their own protection; and, at the same time, a repressive turn—based on racial, gender and class divides—especially evident in the making of mass incarceration.

Inevitably, the transformations in the field of public safety have impacted more widely the way public policy is conceptualized and implemented, particularly in places, such as the South of the USA, where conservative political traditions and particularly turbulent neoliberal transformations have coexisted. Add to this the historically high levels of violent crime in the USA (when compared to the rest of the Western world), especially in big cities—in Memphis the murder rate is some ten- or fifteen-fold that of any average European city. “There’s never a scenario—an activist told me in an interview—where [police] are not asking for more money. Ever.” That those requests are often met is not very surprising in a context where public safety is the central political argument and violent crime is especially problematic, hence the pressure over local policymakers to act quickly and through measures expected to have direct impact over crime. But the political dimension does not tell all of the story and the uniqueness of the US institutional system, where local authorities have almost exclusive competence over urban security, differently from virtually everywhere in Europe, plays an important role.

There are 18,000 criminal police departments in the USA—for comparison, in Italy there are four criminal police forces, plus numerous local police departments with no criminal police competence. Police power and public safety, in the USA, are competence of states, which virtually everywhere delegate them to local authorities, municipalities and counties. Besides the obvious matters of inefficiency—there are 18,000 police chiefs, for one, and thousands of “departments” with one or two employees—, this safety localism also means increased spatial injustice among places. In a country where crime, poverty and social problems are deeply correlated in space, impacting especially “inner”, minority-majority cities³, the least affluent polities are also those where there is more pressure to shift resources toward police⁴. It is therefore at the local level, and due to the coupling of policing and social policy in local authorities, that the political environment above discussed effects policymaking directly. If safety is expected to be delivered by local policymakers, the “obvious” consequence is shifting resources away from social and urban policy, and toward police; which however means cutting on prevention and delegating it to organizations whose skill is repression, as the quotation that opens this essay sums up. As such, in places like Memphis, austerity is not simply the effect of cuts from the top-down, but a more complex process linked with US localism and stemming from both vertical and horizontal relations.

The transformations in the field of public safety have impacted more widely the way public policy is conceptualized and implemented, particularly in places.

With regard to vertical relations, things are more complex than the simple downloading of austerity. For instance, during the last few decades, at the same time as the federal government was cutting on social programs and grants—and associating the latter systematically with police enforcement (Hinton, 2016)—, it was indirectly funding police departments through both grants and donations of military equipment. Police departments across the country, including in small towns, are nowadays military, much more than criminal, forces, as made evident, for instance, by the way the deployment of SWAT teams has become ordinary, for instance to make arrests or search houses. Horizontal relations possibly play an even more important role here, on many levels. First, historical “white flight”, itself justified through rhetorical discourses about crime and safety, has restructured tax bases by bringing the bulk of fiscal capacity away from cities at the center of metropolitan areas—cities that keep providing services, white-collar jobs and infrastructures necessary to entire metros. Memphis has in time expanded its area in order not to lose population, with the result that it is nowadays one of the least dense cities in a country of extremely spread-out cities—its surface is slightly bigger than the land surface of New York, which hosts thirteen times Memphis’ population. Second, in a policy environment that boosts city-city competition for the attraction of investments and corporate jobs (see Kantor, 2016), economic growth is itself often based on giving up tax collection through incentives and the like—in Memphis, mostly through the PILOT, Payment In Lieu Of Taxes, program⁵. Add to this the necessity, in

3 In Europe, the spatial correlation of social problems and crime is not everywhere evident and, for instance, in Southern European countries, it is basically not existent.

4 It is worth reminding that most US metropolitan areas are made up of a central, majority-minority, relatively poor city, while affluent classes tend to reside in suburbs, which are in most cases independent municipalities. The cases of big cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, where geographic patterns of wealth and poverty are more complex, are quite exceptional in this context.

5 Possibly better than the numerous available academic texts, an episode of John Oliver’s Last Week Tonight

order to attract those very investments and jobs, to “sell” the cities as safe: I have elsewhere discussed (Tulumello, 2018) how the geography of security policymaking in Memphis is twofold, and can be summed up as “policing the racialized poor and reassuring the wealthy”.

At this intersection, austerity becomes at the same time an inevitability and a political project. It is inevitable because it is mainly implemented by governmental authorities, the local ones, which have formal autonomy, but are put in a position in which alternatives to the status quo, when they are sought, are almost (politically, institutionally and socially) untenable. But places like Memphis also show with particular evidence the face of austerity as a political project. The permanent, low-intensity austerity characteristic of such places is powerfully capable—in my opinion even more than Peck’s catastrophe urbanism—of structurally restructuring politics, policy and polity in the long term, in that it progressively forecloses the possibility for political alternatives at the local level. Whether the experiences of places like Memphis constitute a vision of a possible future for places where austerity is more recent (for instance where it is more constitutively linked to the recent global recession) is, in my opinion, a topic that deserves much discussion, for instance by way of comparative urban studies among places, like the South of the USA, that have been marginalized by dominant explanations of neoliberalism and austerity so far.

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sums up the contradictions of this system: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bl19RoR7lc.