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Intervention – “Shrinking Worlds: Austerity and Depression”

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Introduction

A park closed, a library shut, or a social housing estate left to ruin. Austerity has dramatically altered the geographies of everyday life. Consider the 2019 Bureau of Investigative Journalism report, which revealed cash-strapped councils have sold-off 12,000 public spaces (Davies et al. 2019). These contracting and disappearing spaces of social infrastructure will deny millions the chance to live, work, and play in public environments. The loss of such urban commons embodies a grinding loss of world. And we *feel* it. Rates of depression in the UK—already some of the highest in the developed world—continue to rise (Bulman 2017). But how might we explore the lived experiences of depression and austerity as part of a shared, and mutable, ecology? This intervention explores the contorted symmetries between our material and psychological worlds—and how they are “shrinking” after years of austere economics. We forefront the relationship between the “violent conditions” (Laurie and Shaw 2018) of austerity and mental ill-health and emphasise the political and ethical need to conceptualise austerity and depression as *worlded* in everyday life.

How are austerity and depression entangled with one another? Mental health is declining across children, young people and adults in the UK. Despite the urgent need to address the nation’s deteriorating mental health, a 2016 report commissioned by the National Health Service (NHS) stated that mental health services within the NHS required an additional one billion pounds of funding by 2020/21 (Mental Health Taskforce 2016). Yet government policies are increasing pressure on a system of mental health provision that is already under-resourced (Mattheys 2015; Mattheys et al. 2016). An analysis by the Royal College of Psychiatrists indicated that spending cuts have resulted in mental health trusts receiving less funding in 2016/17 than in 2012 (Bulman 2018). Indeed, a 2018 report from the Association of Child Psychotherapists stated that the mental health crisis of children and young people was a “silent catastrophe”, in which a lack of resources for mental health services was a contributing factor (ACP 2018: 2). For these reasons, and many more, the crises of mental health cannot be separated from the uneven geographies of austerity—particularly in landscapes *already* wounded after decades of deindustrialization and capital flight (see Pain 2019). We thus take seriously the spatiality of mental health.

Austerity: From a Fiscal Policy to a Lived Experience

Austerity has hit the Department for Communities and Local Government particularly hard. An analysis by the National Audit Office revealed that grants to local councils had been reduced on average by 49.1 percent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2017/18, making local authorities the most squeezed of all areas of state activity (Chu 2018). Post-industrial cities in the North of England have faced the worst cuts (Gray and Barford 2018), with Salford, South Tyneside, Wigan, Oldham, and Gateshead among the worst affected councils. Such cuts are differentially experienced along axes of race, gender, and class. And this will continue for the foreseeable future. An analysis by the Local Government Association found that funding between 2015/16 and 2019/20 will drop from £9,927 million to £2,284 million, with almost half of 168 local authorities receiving *no* government funding (Bulman 2018). All told, between 2019 and 2020, UK local authorities face the largest spending cuts since the commencement of the austerity agenda in 2010.

These numbers are more than bleak reading. Austerity is materialized in the lived (and *depressed*) geographies of everyday life (Hall 2018; Hitchen 2016; Raynor 2016). Local authorities are responsible for the provision of many services, including public libraries, swimming pools, community centres, public parks, street lights, road maintenance, and adult social care. Their closure demonstrates austerity’s spatial impacts—and how the effects of austerity will linger for the foreseeable future (Raynor 2018). Austerity instantiates a temporality that is not bound to a single event, but is an ongoing condition with no clear end or resolution (Hitchen 2019: 20).

When understood as lived, “austerity is a multiplicity that surfaces in numerous domains of peoples’ day-to-day practices” (Hitchen 2016: 103). Austerity materialises across multiple social geographies, events, and objects, bringing austerity to the forefront of people’s lives—both exacerbating and catalysing feelings of depression. These melancholic imprints are located in an empty kitchen cupboard (Garthwaite 2016), the bare flowerbeds at the end of street that once bloomed (Raynor 2016), the anticipation of receiving benefit sanctions (Garthwaite et al. 2018), the letter through the door that might hold within it details of lost welfare support (Hitchen 2016). Austerity is felt in conditions of anxiety (Harris et al. 2018), fear (Clayton et al. 2015), disaffection (Gilbert 2015), weariness (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2018), pessimism (Coleman 2016), and paranoia (Hitchen 2019). These effects can remain invisible if austerity is limited to the macro-political scale (see, for example, Blyth 2013; Krugman 2012).

Shrinking Worlds

Rates of depression and anxiety among teenagers has soared by 70 percent in the past 25 years (Broomfield 2017). Yet the number of qualified psychiatric nurses has plummeted since the Conservatives came to power. On the one hand, we can thus understand austerity’s mental discontents through the notion of a *shrinking welfare state* (see for example Gray and Barford 2018; Lobao et al. 2018). But on the other hand, a geographical approach to mental health asks a different, but related question: how is the spatial violence of austerity interiorized, felt, and negotiated in everyday landscapes? As our physical worlds shrink in times of austerity—as parks close and libraries shut—what consequences does this have for our collective mental ecologies? As common spaces disappear, *do we shrink back into ourselves—tossed ever inwards?*

Our use of the term world describes the *existential space*, or the unavoidable situatedness of being-human. We want to carefully think through the meaning of a depressive world-view under times of (fiscal) depression. To do so, we understand austerity through its complex worldings. We always find ourselves *there*, in a place—our existence threaded to the world and our neighbours. In particular, we are interested in how austerity *shrinks our social and psychological horizons*. As Hitchen (2019: 5) describes, “[a]usterity is more than an absence or presence. Instead it has *shape*—a particular spatiality that allows austerity to be present with varying degrees of resolution”. This shape fluctuates across ambiguous, nebulous, to barely discernible conditions.

Worlds are social “infrastructures” (Butler 2015: 12) that bind us together. Public services are a vital part of these social infrastructures: they enable connections to form between individuals and communities. They foster everyday and mutual encounters of connection, understanding, and widen the capacities to live with difference (see, for example, Peterson 2017). Services such as libraries, children’s centres, and parks *open up worlds*. Accordingly, the question of austerity is always one of *world*: for it is within worlds that austerity touches multiple bodies, buildings, minds, ecologies, streets—slashing the potential of worlds to provide a dignified life. Austerity and its discontents—multiple, uneven, and shape-shifting—are always worlded.

Public infrastructures disclose our worldly togetherness. “The dependency of human creatures on sustaining and supporting infrastructural life shows that the organization of infrastructure is intimately tied with an enduring sense of individual life: how life is endured, and with what degree of suffering, livability, or hope” (Butler 2015: 21). The physical spacings of streets, housing, bus routes, libraries, parks, schools, woodlands, and health clinics, give shape to our social realities and psychological landscapes. Where else can we so easily interact meaningfully with, or simply *be around*, others? Accordingly, as austerity damages and contracts these infrastructures (see Berlant 2016), our collective worlds begin to shrink, slip, and slide away.

Public commons within local communities are tangibly contracting, from youth services (Horton 2016), Sure Start Centres (Jupp 2013, 2016), public libraries (Corble 2018; Hitchen 2019; Norcup 2017) to parks (Jorgensen 2017). With public budgets shrinking year after year, services are closing, opening times are reduced, and capacities are diminished. Some services—libraries in particular—have turned to unpaid labour to meet funding shortfalls (once branded under David Cameron’s “big society”). In short, under austerity, public spaces of assembly and coexistence—which resist and overlap with a capitalist production of space—are becoming fewer and smaller. Austerity is generating a *physically shrinking world* for millions of people. And the ability for individuals to *open up* worlds—and let their minds breathe—is hindered. Austerity is suffocating the world of its public vitality—constricting its spaces, encounters, and temporalities.

Moving Forward: Worlding Depression

We place the lived sensation of depression—the depressive *world-view*—at the centre of our austere geography (which is can be easily overlooked by biomedical understandings). This intervention is allied with existing work on the social and economic determinants of mental health (see for example Curtis 2010; Curtis et al. 2018). We find much value in the emerging interest in relationships between austerity and (mental) health outcomes (Akhter et al. 2018; Bhandari et al. 2017; Mattheys et al. 2016). Yet by taking a geographical approach—and considering how depression is worlded, *and how the world depresses*—we move beyond the subject-centred nature of health interventions (Doughty 2013), towards a more ecological understanding of depression’s relationship to austerity. Significantly, we argue that depression shares a complex loop with the *shrinking of our worlds*.

The shrinking of our worlds is an insidious, barely perceptible process: the cumulative effect of dwelling in wounded and contracting ecologies—spaces in which our existence collapses into tighter and more suffocating shells. As a result, depression so often confines individuals to their immediate worlds—to homes, bedrooms, minds. Depression diminishes the ability to connect with others. Life is dampened and slowed. It is simultaneously numbing and oppressive. Depression consumes everyday life and extinguishes its potentiality and shared vibrancy. This is one of the cruellest aspects of our shrinking worlds: the weight of existence is individualizing, rather than distributed amongst worldly coexistents. As Johanna Luttrell (2015: 876-877) writes, when “the body takes the place of a world, and we are thrown inward upon ourselves, we are ‘too far in’ our bodies, there is no outlet for our needs, imaginings, expressions, our uniqueness and our dignity”. Worldlessness means living in obscurity—forced to exist without leaving footprints.

And here we reach the event horizon: the point at which our shrinking mental and social worlds collapse into each other. A black dot that traps too many lives, often with devastating results. As the social frays under austerity, we see the violent entanglements between shrinking physical and psychological worlds, which “forcefully constrain, traumatize, and poison the very resources of our becoming” (Laurie and Shaw 2018: 8). Depression is a complex condition, tangled between neurological, biological, and social conditions (see Peake and Mullings 2019). Our point is not to ignore these factors—but to see how they are emplaced in shrinking worlds. Closed parks and abandoned community centres are spaces removed from the fabric of everyday life. This has profound consequences: an individual with depression may visit the park in search of a therapeutic landscape only to find it closed; another seeking solace in a local library discovers it shut; or another who visits a swimming pool as part of their active mental health discovers their opening hours slashed. These spaces of connection, solace and healing—that are so important for people living with depression—are simply disappearing under conditions of austerity.

Taking seriously the worlding of austerity and depression requires more examination. We have only begun to articulate their cruel embrace. Where can people turn as social infrastructures decay? How are people able to *positively* respond to the contracting horizons of austerity? We think the concept of shrinking worlds is an important framework for researching the psycho-spatial effects of austerity, and the long-term implications of contracting social infrastructures on collective life.

We also hope the intervention we have sketched can help us chart passageways to more dignified worlds. If austerity shrinks and traumatizes our worlds, building after building, street after street (see Pain 2019), we must insist on the right to *open worlds back up*. And it is here that geography—as both knowledge and praxis—offers cartographies of hope and healing. Soaring rates of depression cannot be tackled by solitary individuals acting alone. We must look to the horizons of our cobeing. As J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006: 165) write, “to change ourselves, we must change the world”.

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