

# Introduction: Anti-politics, austerity and spaces of politicisation

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## Abstract

In this introduction we first set out an engagement with the interconnections between forms of anti-politics and spaces of politicization and how these are figured in the special issue. We then detail the ways the papers in the special issue examine questions of depoliticization and politicization of austerity. The final section briefly outlines some key ways in which we envision emergent lines of progressive politicization emerging from the left.

## Keywords

Austerity, anti-politics, politicisation, space, progressive

“Anti-politics” has become one of the key terms of the contemporary political conjuncture. The Presidencies of Trump and Bolsonaro, Brexit and the emboldened radical right, particularly in Europe and the United States, has occurred in a context of declining trust and participation in traditional representative politics. These forms of politics have intersected with entrenched forms of racializing nationalism (see Valluvan, 2018; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). In this respect the current conjuncture poses particular challenges for a renewal of progressive left politics as the reaction against globalisation and international proliferation of (transnational) policies of austerity has seemingly fuelled reactionary and nativist sentiment. Further, such rightist articulations of key issues, often allied with anti-political tropes, has tended to exert pressure and close down the spaces for the left to re-articulate them in more progressive terms.

Despite a surge in commentaries and research on anti-politics there continues to be a lack of analytical purchase on their relation to processes of austerity and “crisis”, though work

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using associated concepts like depoliticisation, post-politics and post-democracy provides some relevant insights (e.g. Griggs et al., 2017; Nolan and Featherstone, 2021). This special issue contributes to redressing this intellectual and theoretical lacuna by bringing together detailed engagements with the dynamics of space and politics through which austerity, crisis and anti-politics are constructed. The interventions situate the spatial practices through which processes of politicisation and de-politicisation are constructed and envisioned. Further, the special issue draws together fine-grained analysis of the geographical imaginaries mobilised through different articulations of anti-politics and populist political practices.

Through doing so the special issue contributes to a systematic evaluation of the relations between anti-politics and the spatial politics of austerity and ‘crisis’. The special issue makes a distinctive contribution in this regard by bringing together scholars from a range of different disciplinary and geographical locations to clarify key issues about how to approach questions of anti-politics from the left. We contend that a rigorous engagement with these dynamics of space and politics can bring significant resources to bear on issues which are of key strategic importance for the left such as relations with the institutions of liberal democracy; the roles for left actors such as unions and social movements; the spatialities of left politics and approaches to populist and nationalist imaginaries. In this introduction we first set out an engagement with the interconnections between forms of anti-politics and spaces of politicization and then detail the ways the papers in the special issue examine questions of depoliticization and politicization of austerity. The final section briefly outlines some key ways in which we envision emergent lines of progressive politicization (Dönmez, 2021) emerging from the left.

## **Anti-politics and spaces of politicization**

“Anti-politics” can be seen as having two main meanings. In political theory, as well as wider humanities and social science research, ‘anti-politics’ means the eradication of ‘politics’, that is contest, contingency and the public realm. For instance, these themes are developed in James Ferguson’s (1994) influential critique of the depoliticizing effects of development in Africa, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, and also in relation to broader investigations of anti-political traditions in Western political discourse (e.g. Hindness, 1997; Schedler, 1997). More recently, ‘anti-politics’ has become an increasingly popular term to capture some of the perceived ills of liberal democracies. Anti-politics has, like related terms, such as post-democracy, post-politics, depoliticization (see Beveridge, 2017; Buller et al., 2018 for interlinkages between the concepts), entered debates in multiple languages, becoming a key concept to examine – most typically – political disenchantment and mistrust of politicians, for instance in post-Second World War Britain (see Clarke et al., 2018). Indeed, as Featherstone argues here, through an engagement with the early New Left, questions of disengagement with politics have important histories, despite often being constructed as a new phenomenon and recent debates (Featherstone, 2021).

In related terms, there have been reflections on the progressive potential or not of *Les antipolitiques* in French (Saint Victor, 2014), the damage to democracy unleashed by the *Antipolitik* of Brexit, Trump as well as the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*) in German (Diehl, 2011; Förtner et al., 2021) and the *antipolitica* transformations in Italy in the Silvio Berlusconi and others (Mete, 2010). Oppositional political movements have also mobilized anti-political discourses and imaginaries. Thus in an insightful discussion of the mobilizations associated with political activists such as Anna Hazare

against corruption in 2011 in India, Partha Chatterjee argued that at the ‘heart of the current anti-corruption movement, its principal moral and emotional force, is that it is anti-political. Politics here, needless to say, only means parliament, ministers, government offices, etc. Anna Hazare, Prashant Bhushan, Arvind Kejriwal, Kiran Bedi are not political. Hence they are pure, with the people’ (Chatterjee, 2011: n.p., see also Davies, 2017).

As Chatterjee indicates here, anti-politics is often articulated through particular ways of constructing ‘the people’ frequently in populist idioms. In the current conjuncture anti-politics is often associated with the current displays of nativist, nationalist and reactionary populism accredited to the likes of US ex-President Donald Trump. Here anti-politics is clearly a politics of antagonism and transgression in relation to the norms of liberal democracy. Debates hinge on how neoliberal political projects have driven inherently anti-political and depoliticizing transitions (via deregulation, privatization, etc.), through its substitution of economics for politics, its elevation of the market above democracy. These intersect with ongoing spaces through which processes of neoliberalisation have been challenged and contested. Thus in her recent book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* Wendy Brown identifies strong strands of articulation between neoliberalism and forms of anti-politics (Brown, 2019: esp 61–64).

Brown argues that ‘neoliberals united in opposing robust democracy- social movements, direct political participation or democratic demands on the state – which they identified with totalitarianism, fascism or rule by mobs’ (Brown, 2019: 61). Further she notes that an active ‘[t]hrottling of democracy was fundamental, not incidental, to the broader neoliberal program’ (62). The combined assault of neoliberals on democratic practices and on articulations of the social Brown suggests are constitutive of deepening forms of anti-politics. Further the passivity of formal politics in the face of the growing inequalities of the global economy has created a context in which the denigration of politics and politicians has flourished.

These inequalities have been intensified through the roll out of austerity measures as arguably the dominant political-economic response to the 2008 crisis (Davies and Blanco, 2017), a context which has emboldened right-wing authoritarian figures and movements (Peck and Theodore, 2019; Santamarina, 2020). Thus Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore note that ‘As if to affirm Thatcher’s premature dismissal that there was ‘no alternative’ to market rule, what followed in the wake of the financial crisis, was, far from a retreat of neoliberalism, more like an audacious exercise in doubling down’ (Peck and Theodore, 2019: 249). This raises key questions of whether anti-politics is driven by, or centred on, contemporary capitalism or state institutions/formal politics. Of course, the two are entangled in the current political conjuncture, in ways that have consequences for the spatialities through which such issues become politicized. Indeed, we might argue that the failings of both meet in the waves of state-implemented austerity which have characterized the post-crisis global economy (see also Beveridge and Koch, 2021). In mainstream academic work, formal politics and politicians tend to be foregrounded, rather than treated as part of a wider political-economic constellation (e.g. Flinders, 2012). As Beveridge and Koch (2019/2021) contend much of the debate on anti-politics is centred on the (nation) state and its formal political institutions as a reified base/sphere for politics and democracy proper.

Focusing on the knotty relations between neoliberalism, (de)politicization, shifting patterns of political voting participation, reactionary politics, anti-politics tends to be seen inherently as – spatially and normatively – improper politics (e.g. Clarke et al., 2018). In such cases, ‘anti-politics’ is a negative term. But it is also potentially a blanketing term.

It risks tarring progressive and regressive politics with the same brush as reactionary, nationalist and nativist movements, if they step out of the logics and spaces of liberal/state politics. Such understandings of anti-politics have been challenged by recent political theory, for instance stressing the antagonistic anti-politics inherent to transformative political change (Newman, 2011) or moves to post-representative politics (Tormey, 2015). More accurately, we might argue that much of what is seen to count as anti-politics is in fact anti-liberal or anti-state politics (Beveridge and Koch, 2021). While by no means the preserve of the Left, anti-politics might be positively understood as the (re)emergence of contestatory and subaltern forms of politics.

The term ‘anti-politics’ can, then, be understood as resting on division: between forms of politics and spaces of politics. If this SI seeks to open-up anti-politics, it does, necessarily, by foregrounding its spatial dimensions. We can conceive of anti-politics as entailing and enabling terrains, spaces and places of politics, whereby space is a mode of politics (see also Dikeç, 2012). Anti-politics in both traditions foregrounds antagonism towards the formal political system, albeit with differing normative stances. The sense is of a detachment and parallel processes. Anti-politics is then a fundamentally spatial mode of politics in the sense that it creates its own spaces or disengages from dominant spaces of politics. However, the spatial aspects of anti-politics are often overlooked in both understandings of anti-politics, which tend to hone in on the mode logic of anti-politics and the contestation of ‘politics’.

What has thus far often been lacking in debates on anti-politics and the current conjuncture is the sense that anti-politics rests on antagonism, which are defining of what counts as the ‘political’. In other words, the ‘political’ is being (re)arranged through anti-politics, which is thus in this way productive. Inevitably in many accounts the state is at the heart of antagonism, but the agents of politics, the stake, source and settings are all at play. As the papers in the Special Issue show, divisions are not simply between formal politics and ‘extra-formal’ politics, in a form of police/politics division that we have become familiar with through the influence of post-foundational philosophy (e.g. Marchart, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2018). Although this field of antagonism is undoubtedly strong it is but one element of the spatiality of anti-politics. Thus what we also see in the papers collected here is the importance of a politics of different spaces – that there are politics which are emergent from particular spaces/spatial conditions, which are antagonistic or distancing towards other spaces of politics, but encompass elements of state and non-state politics, with their spatialities, be that the ‘urban’, the ‘rural’ or the ‘nation’. This pluralises some of the spaces of politics that have shaped the imaginaries of work on post-politics and depoliticization.

The contributions of the papers in this Special Issue, through their different engagements with the polities of austerity, seek to throw light on logics and spaces of anti-politics, drawing distinctions between Left and Right, liberalism and radicalism. In doing so the contributions here align generally with traditions of political thought, which understand anti-politics as something paradoxically political, with modern historical antecedents, a range of tendencies emergent in and generative of opposition to politics as it is seen to be (Newman, 2011). It also seeks to take the spaces of anti-politics seriously as stakes and sources of politics and not simply as backdrops to “real” politics. If there is always a politics to anti-politics, always an object of contestation, ‘politics’ to which anti-politics is directed, then the question is what defines that politics and in what spaces can we observe it. The next section elaborates on what these concerns bring to an analysis of the politics of austerity in different geographical contexts.

## Locating the de-politicisation and politicisation of austerity

Recent debates and contributions in geography have significantly revitalised and renewed understandings of processes of politicisation and de-politicisation. Such debates have, however, raised key questions about how the spatialities of such processes are to be theorised and conceptualised. One influential strand of theorising, most prominently associated with Erik Swyngedouw's work, has been informed by quite universalising narratives and claims. Thus Swyngedouw has argued for ensuring that differently located struggles become universalised contending that 'emancipatory interruption has to universalise' to become 'an egalitarian inclusive act for all' (Swyngedouw, 2020: 6). While such narratives can offer powerful, broader framings their rather axiomatic logic can obscure the specific practices through which issues such as austerity become politicised or de-politicised.

Further, they provide a way of thinking about the political and notions of post/anti-politics which is not particularly sensitive to the ways in which struggles against austerity, and the political projects which shape austerity, are constructed spatially. This has consequences for the terms on which the relations between anti-politics and austerity are conceptualised. In particular they can serve to obscure the ways in which austerity articulates with particular political trajectories and formations. Indeed, such accounts can serve to marginalise the forms of political agency and identification that are shaped through 'actually existing' forms of contestation, as Featherstone argues in his contribution here. A different take on the relations between politicisation and de-politicisation emerges in Costis Hadjimichalis's book *Crisis Spaces*.

This powerful account of the politics of the 'European "debt crisis"' is attentive to the diverse processes through which austerity was de-politicised, but is also keenly engaged with the different ways in which it was brought into contestation (Hadjimichalis, 2017). Central here is a positioning of austerity in relation to broader spatial and temporal processes and imaginaries. Thus he positions the Greek debt crisis in relation to the broader dynamics of uneven geographical development between Northern and Southern Europe which were institutionalised through the Eurozone. Further, he positions both neoliberal developmental trajectories and trajectories of resistance and solidarity as dynamic and spatially articulated. This intersects with Standring's argument in his contribution here regarding the importance of challenging constructions of austerity which present it in narrow terms as simply a mode of response to the 2008 crisis (Standring, 2020).

Through doing so Hadjimichalis demonstrates how engaging with the spatial construction of politicisation and de-politicisation can make a key difference to the terms on which austerity is understood. There are strong affinities between Hadjimichalis's account and Karaliotas's discussion of the politics of austerity in Greece in his contribution to the special issue. Karaliotas similarly refuses a straightforward temporal demarcation of austerity which sees the 'debt crisis' as a decisive break with earlier policy pathways and trajectories. Rather he draws attention to the ways in which between the mid-1990s and the financial crisis of 2008 a narrative of a "strong Greece" was established based on large-scale infrastructure projects and a 'consensus politics' between the centre-left and centre right parties, Pasok and New Democracy. These parties alternated in power and 'hailed neoliberal policies as the key to an era of prosperity and participation in the Eurozone' (Karaliotas, 2021: 498).

For Karaliotas the forms of 'post-democratic closure' that shaped this neoliberal consensus were central to analysing the ways in which Greek political leaderships responded to the 'debt crisis' in 2008 and onwards. Karaliotas also traces the 'multi-faceted and heterogeneous democratic politics' that emerged in opposition to the imposition of pulverising

forms of austerity on Greece (497). A key contribution here is to trace some of the spatial imaginations that shaped the terms on which austerity was (re)politicised. He argues that while SYRIZA ruptured the ‘post-democratic script both in Greece and Europe more generally’ the political *imaginaries* that shaped the party’s ‘left populism’ were strongly constituted by nationalist imaginaries (see also Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2018). Indeed these were the shared basis of SYRIZA’s governing coalition with the right wing nationalist party, ANEL, and exerted significant pressure on the forms of ‘politicisation from below’ that had emerged in the early 2010s, especially in terms of progressive solidarities with migrants (see also Karaliotas and Kapsani, 2020).

Karaliotas’s account suggests, then, the importance of thinking about the locatedness of forms of politicisation, and, through drawing on Rancière, the ways in which forms of politicisation can rework existing forms of spatialisation and politics. Pinar Dönmez’s paper on ‘progressive politicisation in Turkey’ engages in important ways with the spatial and temporal articulations of resistance to austerity in what she describes as countries on the ‘peripheries of capitalism’ (Dönmez, 2021: 513). Dönmez’s considers the ‘multiplicity and diversity’ of struggles on the Turkish left against successive ‘waves of austerity’ in the country. Thus she considers the ‘large-scale mobilisation by diverse segments’ of Turkish society against two IMF-led and government endorsed austerity programmes (in 1958 and 1970). This is an important reminder that austerity has long been central to the policy regimes of international financial institutions and has often interlocked with military dictatorships and regimes in contexts as diverse as Turkey, Argentina, Chile and Pakistan. As Vijay Prashad has argued in more general terms, ‘IMF reason discounted the well-being of the vast mass of people and the reason, for odious debt, instead asking the already marginal populations to bear the full brunt of austerity’ (Prashad, 2012: 63).

A key contribution here is to consider the struggles of forms of precarious workers who have often been marginalised by dominant accounts in labour history and labour geography (Ghosh and Bandyopadhyay, 2021; Ray, 2020). By tracing the struggles of tobacco workers Dönmez’s engagement focuses on different ways of understanding working class political agency in relation to austerity. These engagements with labour agency are situated in relation to the significant linkages between political authoritarianism and neoliberalism/austerity in Turkey and she closes with discussion of the increasing repression of austerity in Turkey under the increasingly authoritarian AKP (see also Karaman, 2013). Here she draws attention to forms of resistances and solidarities being shaped within this context which have significant resonance given the ascendant forms of authoritarian right wing politics elsewhere.

The interrelations between forms of neoliberal austerity and political authoritarianism has been a long-standing characteristic of politics in parts of Latin America. Countries such as Chile served as key laboratories of neo-liberal ‘reforms’ in the 1970s which had a strong influence on such arch-proponents of neo-liberal austerity as Margaret Thatcher (Beckett, Riesco, 2007). In this respect opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship by organisations such as the country’s exiled union confederation the Central Única De Trabajadores De Chile (CUT) fused a concern with human rights with opposition to the forms of austerity associated with the Junta’s neoliberal policies (CUT, 1975). That these legacies are ongoing is underlined by the concerted repression of anti-austerity protests in the Autumn of 2019, which also articulated ongoing political demands in opposition to dictatorship era laws (Vergara, 2021). Another Southern Cone country which has experienced both severe political repression and imposition of austerity politics is Argentina and in her contribution to the special issue Victoria Habermehl considers dynamics in the wake of the countries ‘profound social political and economic crisis’ of 2001 (Habermehl, 2021: 536).

Habermehl makes a key contribution to thinking about the spaces of politicisation and de-politicisation through fine-grained discussion of some of dynamics at the level of the neighbourhood. She does this through a fine-grained discussion of the Mercado de Economica Solidaria Bonpland a solidarity retail market in Buenos Aires. She characterises the market as representing “a diversity and multiplicity of attempts” to create alternative economic possibilities within the current system.’ This is important in terms of the practices through which everyday relations become politicised and she notes that it is based on a ‘plural approach’ which is processual rather than ‘prescriptively demanding one approach’. She also positions the Mercado Bonpland relationally in ways which emphasise how neighbourhood politics can be constituted through linkages with other progressive initiatives and solidarities.

A significant example she uses here, with relevance to broader discussion of the negotiation of austerity, is the ways which stallholders negotiated a dynamic ‘solidarity response’ to price hikes of the herbal tea Mate, an Argentinian staple, caused by global economic speculation. Rather than being drawn into profiteering stall holders mobilised existing linkages with ‘co-operatively run Mate producers’ to refuse to be drawn into speculation and to reinforce a ‘set of values that ran counter to those of hegemonic capitalist exploitation’. In this way Habermehl demonstrates the importance of what she terms ‘everyday antagonising’ to ways of thinking about processes of politicisation, in ways which resonate with Beveridge and Koch’s paper as well as some of the critiques of figures like Swyngedouw, but importantly maintains a commitment to engaging with political contestation and agency.

Engagement with contestation and agency is also central to the discussion of the political trajectories of the Scottish left in Featherstone’s contribution here (Featherstone, 2021). He locates contemporary opposition to austerity in Scotland in relation to the histories through which deindustrialisation has been negotiated. Through doing so he draws attention to the ways in which dominant forms of anti-austerity politics have become articulated with a left-nationalist imaginaries. He also embeds this discussion in relation to the ways in which activists in working class areas of Glasgow such as Castlemilk have narrated their involvement in different waves of opposition to neoliberal articulations of austerity. Through locating opposition to austerity in relation to the fracturing and uneven geographies of the UK, the paper emphasises how dominant articulations of space are not a given backdrop to the politics of austerity, but can be brought into contestation and reworked through them.

Such an engagement with the relations between spatial relations and politics is also key to the contributions of Beveridge and Koch and Standing which both engage with questions around housing politics. Thus Beveridge and Koch argue, drawing on a discussion of housing struggles in Berlin, that the urban everyday has become a key site, source and setting for progressive forms of anti-politics. By this they mean the contestation of a particular form of state-led austerity politics, characteristic of the city from the 1990s onwards. Anti-politics here is politicising and productive, collective and contentious, drawing on alternative spatial imaginaries of the ‘city’ and the urban everyday to re-conceive democratic politics of housing in Berlin. A key contribution of the paper is to problematise the binary approach to the state often found in literatures on anti-politics, post-politics and depoliticization: whereby the state is associated with politics and anti-politics is aligned against it. The authors show that (anti-)political spaces and forms are more hybrid and contingent in a context of austerity and crisis. They show how housing campaigners envisage a local state embedded in ‘urban society’ with multiple forms of democracy (direct and representational) and authority (state and societal).

A concern with the dynamics of housing struggles in the context of austerity is also central to Standing's discussion of the relation between neoliberalism, expertise and anti-politics. For Standing the 'anti-political nature of expertise' in neoliberal contexts shapes an instrumental logic 'so that which is contentious, contextual and contingent – or ultimately political in nature – becomes subject to measurement and risk' (Standing, 2021: 559). He also draws attentions to the activities of groups like the PAH in Spain, which was central to the popular struggles against evictions after the 2008–2009 crisis. He notes that through contesting such forms of expertise have 'been successful in constructing political subjects around shared experiences and knowledge of housing struggles, framing this within a context of direct and insurgent action that is explicitly political'.

By contrast Förntner et al., writing in the context of strong rural support for the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AFD), discuss the ways in which forms of anti-politics can be shaped in relation to uneven regional geographies (see also Mackinnon, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Förntner et al. position their argument in relation to a detailed discussion of Lefebvre and Adorno's writings on the rural using these insights to discuss how the political right is able to hegemonize particular constructions of the rural. Their account engages with the ways in which AFD have been able to exploit and intensify existing spatial divisions and uneven geographies, some of which link back to the contested terms of German reunification. Thus they contend that in regions such as 'Western Pomerania-Greifswald' in North Eastern Germany, 'antipolitical discourse is stabilizing the comprehensive peripheralization and its forms of the rural production of space' (Förntner et al., 2021: 589).

In the Afterword, Ana Drago reflects on the "profound legitimization crisis" which the papers, in their diverse readings of anti-politics, reveal. For her, the papers confirm the deep crisis of neoliberalism and the end of consensual and depoliticized politics through contestatory spatial politics and geographical imaginaries, which provide conceptual and political resources for progressive left politics. She emphasizes the benefits of the SI's engagement with "a spatial perspective that allows us to grasp not only "where" depoliticization-repoliticization is happening, but "how" anti-politics, austerity and crisis are being crafted by summoning geographical imaginaries and through an array of spatial practices that are constitutive of austerity, crisis and anti-politics" (3) (Drago, 2021: 599, italics in original). Building on this and through further engagement with the special issue papers, she goes on to argue that austerity "has shattered the ideological narrative of a global post-class" which had helped legitimise the (neo)liberal centre (3). She closes her piece by foregrounding the spatial contours of new antagonisms emergent from this post-crisis context, observing that struggles between the left and right are shaping and being shaped by new political geographies.

## Towards forms of progressive politicisation?

When Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin wrote *The Kilburn Manifesto* in 2013 they contended that 'the economic model that has underpinned the social and political settlement of the last three decades is unravelling, but the broader political and social consensus apparently remains in place' (Hall et al., 2015: 9). They were compelled to intervene because in their estimation while the economic situation was in crisis the political settlement was 'up for grabs' at this juncture. While there has been significant left opposition and attempts to shape the ensuing political settlement in more progressive directions and that these issues are still in process, we write from a recognition that in most contexts it has been the political right that has been more successful in shaping the politics of the current

conjuncture. Further it is a version of right wing politics that is increasingly inflected with authoritarianism, most dramatically through the Trump sponsored assault on the Capitol building in Washington DC on 6 January 2021, and extremely regressive politics around race, gender and sexuality.

Further, left populist formations such as Syriza, which garnered the hopes of many on both the Greek and internationalist left, have largely failed to offer inspiring alternatives to austerity. In Syriza's case ending up implementing the very policies they had opposed, albeit under significant pressures to do so. With the defeat of other formations such as Corbyn and Sanders, figures like Biden and Starmer are showing strong indications of moving away from antagonistic stances towards austerity politics (Davis, 2020; Featherstone, 2020). Rather they show distinct signs of seeking to 'reinvent' some of the modes of 'consensual' neoliberalism associated with the Washington Consensus of Blair's erstwhile 'Third Way'. As Ana Drago notes in her afterword here it is important to recall that 'the political and spatial consensus of liberal democracies and neoliberal globalization' such formations were characterised by have 'been continuously challenged over the last two decades' in different ways both by figures on the political left and by elements of the far-right. In this respect we close by seeking to draw out a set of reflections on sources of what Pinar Dönmez in her contribution refers to as 'progressive forms of politicisation' which might signal some hope in these difficult times (Dönmez, 2021: 516).

Firstly, there are a set of questions around the role of the local state associated with what has been termed the 'new municipalism' and is being articulated in cities like Barcelona, Preston (UK), Jackson (Mississippi USA) (e.g. Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2021). These movements have been defined by innovative engagements by the left to offer alternatives to the regressive and hollowed out role of the local state envisioned by different forms of austerity politics. As this also is based, on a recognition, as Beveridge and Koch (2021: 11) argue here, that the local state has emerged as a key terrain of struggle as it becomes 'reshaped and reconfigured under austerity'. In this respect while the local state has been central to the rolling out and imposition of austerity in different contexts, the role of the local state has also been contested and has, as in previous political conjunctures, emerged as a site with potential for shaping innovative forms of left polities (see also Cooper and Herdman, 2020; Cooper et al., 2019).

The new municipalism raises the prospect of a progressive politicisation and democratisation of the "urban", though detailed reflection on the contingencies and achievements of projects is still emerging, such as Janoschka and Mota (2020) on the Madrid case and Rossi (2018) on the urban dimension of right-wing populism in Italy. The new municipalism is conceived both in terms of cities (in practice usually larger ones), but also urbanization as a political plane to develop alternatives to nation state centred politics – contesting neoliberal and nativist agendas and forging transnational networks of solidarity and policy transfer (Thompson, 2021). This can be read as an (anti-)politics contesting the nation state and its austerity policies, whilst also developing new knowledge practices and political mobilisations to overcome them, as Standring's article in this issue details in relation to the Barcelona en Comú Platform (Standring, 2021: 567). This movement, which has been in minority government since 2015, raises intriguing questions about the transformative potential of its constituent parts: the 'local and the 'urban' as settings, sites and stakes of progressive left politics. The new municipalism also raises possibilities, as well as challenges, in terms of its ambitions to be a political "binary-buster", given projects are often articulated in terms of collapsing the boundaries between social movements and political parties, direct and representative democracy, whilst combining a politics centred on local state power and the urban everyday (Beveridge and Koch, 2021: x; Thompson, 2021).

Secondly, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic is proving, unsurprisingly, to be a key significant terrain of contestation from both left and right- and to signal the enduring effects and legacies of austerity. The literally deadly response of right wing governments in ignoring the consequences of the pandemic, allied with refusals of rightists to wear masks and anti-vaxxer movements intersect in with the different positions on the politicisation of expertise raised by Standing's paper. By contrast the way the pandemic has been articulated from the left underlines the ways in which it intersects with ongoing grievances in relation to the geographies of austerity. Thus in the UK the response to Covid has been articulated is in relation to the uneven and fracturing geographies of the state.

Thus Keir Starmer, the current UK Labour Party leader, has responded to the fall of the so-called 'Red Wall' seats, constituencies in the North of England which have long been safe Labour seats, but which were lost to the Conservatives in the devastating 2019 election, by stressing discourses of patriotism rather than engaging with ongoing processes of regional inequality. These inequalities have begun to take centre-stage in some of these debates in contrast to the largely empty Conservative Party rhetoric of 'levelling up' (Mackinnon, 2020). They also have signalled the importance of engaging with the politics of care. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on 'low paid workers, women and BAME people' is both a consequence of austerity and an axis of emergent forms of politicisation (Lazenby, 2021: n.p., see also Emejulu and Bassell, 2015). Carolyn Jones, director of the Institute of Employment Rights, has likened Covid to an X-Ray 'revealing the fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built', arguing that those 'fractures have been particularly evident in the UK after decades of austerity, cuts in services, deregulation of workplaces and outsourcing of jobs' (cited by Lazenby, 2021: n.p.). In this context there has also been some signs of a rise in trade union membership in the UK which is beginning to reverse decades of decline.

In other geographical contexts the dominant responses to Covid-19 have also intersected with the spatial politics of inequality in significant ways. Thus in India, where lockdowns were imposed in ways which left many migrant workers stranded, this has led to important forms of politicisation of the conditions of migrant workers. Thus Shreya Ghosh and Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay have argued that these forms of politicisation have 'brought to the fore their overarching identity as "migrants", over and above other contextual identities of occupation and kinship.' Further they suggest that this led to new spaces of politicisation and intensified demands for political representation. Thus they note that 'During the lockdown, this identity has repeatedly asserted itself through spontaneous mass-gatherings in major urban transit hubs. Remote voting for migrant workers will further consolidate this identity and enable newer organising in the trade union plane to imagine new generalities, consistent with the contemporary realities of migration and work (Ghosh and Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

Finally, a further sign of hope and possibility is the concerted fightback against the relations between forms of right wing authoritarianism and deeply entrenched racism. These movements are also challenging and bringing into contestation the structuring logics of coloniality which continue to exert pressure and set limits on forms of the political in different contexts (see Featherstone, 2021). The impact of powerful forms of resistance politics, such as the transnational wave of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, poses significant challenges to the broader continued racialised colonial framings of the political. The way the right is seeking to aggressively close down such forms of politicisation also serves as an oblique recognition of the extent to the threats and unsettling effect they have on entrenched orders of privilege.

In many contexts the more institutional left also has an ambiguous relationship to these challenges, which raise important questions of the terms and spatial practices through which they are politicised. Thus figures like Keir Starmer the current UK Labour Party leader have notoriously pushed back against some of the key demands of the Black Lives Matter movement (Elliott Cooper, 2020). There is also a need for the broader left to engage with different geographies of politicisation around questions of racialized articulations of austerity. Ana Santamarina Guerrero has argued that the neighbourhood politics of the Spanish far-right party VOX in Madrid has been partly successful in managing to articulate grievances around inequality in relation to regressive politics around race, nation and gender, whilst also mobilising disaffection with 'established' politics (Santamarina, 2020). Her account of anti-fascist resistance to VOX highlights how alternative forms of political presence can shape places in more progressive ways. This case is also an important reminder that the terms and stakes of anti-politics are articulated through different spaces and forms of struggle.

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