THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF URBAN CONTESTATION IN TIMES OF TURBULENCE AND CRISIS

Crispian Fuller\textsuperscript{1} and Karen West\textsuperscript{2}

Sociology and Policy Group
School of Languages and Social Sciences
Aston University
Birmingham B4 7ET

\textsuperscript{1} Corresponding author: c.fuller@aston.ac.uk
\textsuperscript{2} Both senior lecturers in the School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham.
ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that processes of turbulence and crisis, produced through contemporary nation state-led austerity programmes, accentuate two powerful and dialectically related forces within the pluralistic contexts of urban sites. First, there is the opening up of taken for granted social orders for critique and contestation among competing constituencies. Second, there is a heightened impulse to efface the radical contingency of social relations, relating to incomplete ‘symbolic social orders’ (such as the dominance of market values in social life), which such contestation implies. The latter includes the role of ‘fantasmatic’ logics that actors construct in accordance to a symbolic order that seeks to bring about ideological hegemonic conditions of control and subordination. This implies greater theoretical sensitivity to the practices of critique or justification by urban actors as they seek to refute (to critique) or defend (to justify) a symbolic order vindicating contemporary processes of nation state-led austerity and marketisation. In this paper we present a theoretical framework for examining such processes of contestation and the (managerial-ideological) defence of austerity. This involves the utilisation of, firstly, ‘French pragmatism’ which provides the theoretical framework in which to explore practices of critique, negotiation and justification relating to denunciation or defence of the ‘managerial domination’ of austerity; and, second, post-Marxist accounts of the construction of (incomplete) symbolic orders, and resulting fantasmatic logics where subjects produce an ordered ‘script’ within such deficient orders, but where ‘dislocation’ forces subjects to ‘confront’ the contingency of social relations.
INTRODUCTION

We are presently witnessing considerable cuts in expenditure for public services as a consequence of austerity programmes, leading to the restructuring and reduction of the state and public services in substantial ways (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011; Streeck and Schafer, 2013). This takes place within a broader context of constraints in which governments cannot introduce progressive policies at the same time as enacting austerity, largely arising from low public sector productivity growth, demographic shifts and suspicion of higher taxes (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). At the same time changes are occurred to the governing of such services in responses to these processes, including the potential for new forms of managerialism in ways similar to that which occurred in the 1980s (see Clarke and Newman, 1997). This is taking place within the context of decades of public service marketisation, deployment of private sector practices in government, growing devolved responsibility to private and voluntary sectors and community involvement for service provision, and continuing emphasis of partnerships as a means in which to deliver certain services. More broadly, for Levitas (2012) austerity represents a continuation of processes of redistribution to the rich that have occurred over the last thirty years.

Scholars such as Rossi (2012) have sought to highlight the critical ‘reasserting’ role of the ‘neo-biopolitical state’ nation state in underpinning the capital accumulation process during crisis episodes. While such processes derive largely from central government-led legislation, the actual detail of how these processes will be strategically and operationally implemented and managed is very much a devolved process to subnational state agencies, although one must recognise the nation state is often a site of considerable critique and resistance (Brenner, 2009).³ Local government and other relevant subnational stakeholders are important sites of mediation between national budget reductions/legislation, and on-going citizen/community and market demands for services within localities. Such processes are occurring across Western nations, with Peck (2012) suggesting that these conditions are leading to ‘a new operational matrix for urban politics’ within what has more broadly been termed ‘austerity urbanism’. Within such thinking cities are emergent and relational spaces, constituted by topologically assembled heterogeneous actors, practices and objects, which work through differing socio-spatial relations (Massey, 2005). It is within such convoluted socio-spatial relations of cities that there is negotiation around service priorities and forms of implementation, and the constant need to produce agreement amongst disparate stakeholders. Such processes have been described by Peck (2012) as involving ‘devolved risk’, ‘destructive creativity’ and ‘deficit politics’. One key element of these processes is contestation within and beyond the state by various actors (Mayer, 2013). As recognised by Clarke and Newman (2012), securing the consent for austerity programmes is elaborate,

³ One such example is that of the recent court case (30.07.13) in which ‘disabled’ families challenged social housing benefit cuts for residents with spare bedrooms through the Human Rights Act and Equality Act.
with various political forces crystallising around such issues, making the production of consensus problematic.

This paper seeks to conceptualise, and illustrate through a case study of Birmingham (UK), the mediation processes within cities as sites of intense social change and institutional innovation and adaptation to nation state policies (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). In particular, there is the potential opening up of taken for granted governing values and practices for critique and contestation within and among disparate stakeholders. There is also a potential heightened impulse to efface the radical contingency of social relations, relating to incomplete ‘symbolic social orders’ (such as the dominance of market values in social life), which such contestation implies. This implies greater theoretical sensitivity to the practices of critique or justification by urban actors as they seek to critique or justify particular governing values and practices in vindicating nation state-led austerity. However, what is equally noteworthy is a certain absence of contestation where one might expect there to be more. The latter includes the role of ‘fantasmatic’ logics that actors construct in accordance to a symbolic order that seek to bring about ideological hegemonic conditions of control and subordination. Such examples include that of Perkins (2012) who examines how austerity programmes were able to produce consent for marketisation and civil society devolved responsibility for parks in San Francisco. One can situate such processes within the context of fantasmatic logics in which residents’ fears of losing their parks compelled them to volunteer. Such accounts demonstrate the need to both seek out the sites of actual and potential contestation and to interrogate the processes by which contestation is muted and displaced. Such issues translate into the following research questions:

1. Where and why does contestation emerge?
2. What critiques are deployed by actors, and what form do they take?
3. What justifications and processes of subordination are deployed by key decision-makers, and what form do they take?
4. Where and how does displaced critique find expression by alternative means?

By adopting such an approach and research questions it is possible to move beyond ‘neoliberalism’ based accounts which for Newman (2013) tend to downplay the role of politics, critical agency, and alternative values, motives, strategies and practices. Similarly, this paper follows the arguments of Lauermann and Davidson (2013) in arguing that such accounts have tended to increasingly dilute the concept by ‘universalising’ all activities that are market-like within its mantra. Equally, though, what needs to be guarded against is an over-eagerness to regard all alternative gestures and practices as portents of the counter-hegemonic (Glynos, 2008, see also West, 2011) and to ignore their potential to sustain
hegemonic orders (Glynos, 2008). As a consequence, this paper focuses principally on the disparate social orders, practices, discourses and actors underpinning contemporary processes of austerity, rather than situating them within debates concerning the extent and nature of neoliberal tendencies. At the same time, however, it is mindful of the way in which subjective engagement with ostensibly alternative practices bears on their transformative and counter-hegemonic potential. Two strands of theory are utilised: ‘Pragmatist Sociology’ as a means for exploring practices of critique, justification and agreement relating to the denunciation or acceptance of austerity programmes, and in reference to broader value-laden institutions; and more recent psycho-social approaches to politics, which explore modes of political engagement and the value content of political statements and their affective power, including how displaced critique finds expression by other means.

In the next section we move on to examine pragmatist sociology, before going on to outline key concepts within recent post-Marxist psycho-social approaches within political science. This is then followed by the presentation of a conceptual framework in which to examine the contemporary processes of critique and justification in austerity-led programmes. In the final section we examine the case of Birmingham (UK) to illustrate how this approach can be deployed. In conclusion, the paper argues that any examination of crisis and possibilities of contestation in cities requires a multi-conceptual perspective focusing on social structures, practices and human agency and subjectivity. More specifically, such an approach should take account of the role of broader (symbolic) institutions, complexities of social life, social practices of negotiation between agency, and the constitution of the ‘self’.

PRAGMATIST SOCIOLOGY: BRINGING THE MACRO AND MICRO TOGETHER

There has been a turn towards ‘practices’ in social sciences, representative of a desire to move away from macro-social based perspectives, as well as recognition of the situated and embedded nature of agency within social context (Reckwitz, 2002). The practice turn undoubtedly represents a broad range of theoretical perspectives, but one theoretical framework that is slowing gaining ascendance is that of the ‘sociology of critique’ perspective. This theoretical approach, which has been commonly labelled Pragmatist Sociology or ‘French Pragmatism’, has arisen in response to perceived inadequacies of Bourdieu’s critical sociology.⁴ Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) argue that many dispositions are within the arrangement of individual situation, but where broader social values, such as those embedded within religion, have a key role. The latter is concurrent with the belief

⁴ The main proponents of this approach, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), argue that Bourdieu (1984) is theoretically geared towards actors being disposed to act according to dispositions, or habitus, and are thus not subject to change over time within different social situations. Bourdieu (1984) also tends to view struggle in terms of the collectivist opposition of social groups, which does not take account of the role of values and the individual choice of actors.
that Bourdieu places too much focus on social reproduction and hierarchical social position through strategic rational actions by actors, irrespective of the role and their relationship with broader societal values and institutions which are the basis of habitual behaviour that directs the everyday of actors, as well as the creative agency of human actors (Gross, 2009). For Gross (2009) pragmatist thinking is not susceptible to such criticisms since it is concerned with both the habits and creativity of actors (see also Joas, 1996).

The basis of Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) pragmatist approach is that of Durkheim’s understandings of moral facts as social facts, thereby emphasising the importance of broader social systems in the development and functioning of morality through discipline, attachment, and autonomy. However, pragmatist sociology differs significantly with Durkheim by moving away from the dominating role of macro social structures, preferring instead to emphasise the causal capacities of actors and the role of ‘action’ and social interactions in the construction of knowledge. More recently, Boltanski (2011) has returned to a consideration of the role of Durkheimian macro-social structures in influencing social life, such as forms of domination, but in combination with the continuing importance of emergent social practices and critical capacities of agency, and termed the ‘pragmatist sociology of critique’ (Blokker and Brighenti, 2011). For Boltanski (2010) there is an important distinction to be made between the ‘world’ and ‘reality’. Building upon Wittgenstein and in ways very similar to American Pragmatist understandings of plurality and radical contingency, the world is constituted by the fluidity and instability of life which can be both within and beyond the control of actors. So that even when there are overt sentient efforts to control the world, ‘something of the world precisely manifests itself every time that events or experiences whose possibility…had not been integrated into the pattern of reality, make themselves present in speech and/or accede to the register of action...’ (Boltanski, 2008: 58).

In contrast, ‘reality’ denotes a situation where actors seek to ‘describe’, frame and bring ‘order’ to particular elements of the world. Efforts at bringing about such control are evident in structured rules and norms, as well as grammatical logics (Blokker, 2011). Yet reality is fragile and uncertainty is endemic because, firstly, ‘critique can always draw events from the world that contradict its logics and furnish ingredients for unmasking its arbitrary and hypocritical character...’ (Boltanski, 2011: 59). Secondly, Boltanski (2011) argues that

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5 In its earlier form Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) argued that societies are constituted by heterogeneous ‘orders of worth’, which are morally-configured judgements of ‘worth’ and legitimate universal ‘common good’. These linguistic and semiotic structured congregations of values and principles define, embody, and represent these iterative understandings of worth and common good (Blokker and Brighenti, 2011). Actors utilise orders of worth during periods of conflict as a means in which to critique and justify their viewpoints (Irwin et al, 2013). In such processes they evaluate and designate worth to actors, actions and objects in accordance to their alignment with achievement of a common good (‘principle of equivalence’) (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). They therefore seek to define reality and truth in accordance with particular values, seeking to connect the particularities of the ‘situations’ in which actors find themselves with much broader value systems, and ultimately produce agreement around knowledge and truth (Cloutier et al, 2013).
human agency is situated within an organic body, immersed within the ‘flux of life’, has ideational viewpoints and interests, and psychoanalytic attributes such as desires and self-identities (see also Woodward et al, 2012). Such conditions lead to difficult in reaching the agreements with other actors and social orders that are characteristics of reality, even when actors are within the same situation. Similarly, no human agency has the resources in which to state reality, and understanding that builds upon a considerable amount of research in actor and practice-focused accounts. Given such considerations this does suggest greater consideration of the construction and contradictions of human agency.

Boltanski (2011) argues that ‘bodiless’ semantically-orientated ‘institutions’ are formed as ‘reality’ cannot fully characterize or co-ordinate an unpredictable and influx world. Institutions are bodiless because human agency does not have the power, competences or resources in which to state the ‘whatness of what is’. Actors are situated, principally in terms of bodily disposition, psychoanalytical attributes and everyday situations. During the everyday and episodes of dispute human agents can only ever express an opinionated point of view, making the production of agreement problematic, and requiring a ‘third party’, namely the institution (Blokker and Brighenti, 2011). The purpose of institutions is to reduce uncertainties, bring about order and co-ordination, and reduce potential critique through their ‘semantic functions’ (an understanding that is endemic to institutionalist accounts such Morgan et al, 2010). They are ‘discursive formations’ seeking to state the ‘whatness of what is’ through such means as defining symbols and words which actors then work within, thereby reducing the differences between the world and reality by preserving the latter despite the former, as well as making this ‘publically’ orientated and acceptable. This takes place by way of bringing together the ‘symbolic’ as stated by those seeking to dominate, and the ‘pragmatic’ world of lived experiences through a ‘practical register’ (Wittgenstein, 1958; Boltanski, 2011). The role of institutions is both positive through ‘semantic security’ where the identities and material properties of actors are maintained in different situations, with the purpose of uniting actors and reducing uncertainties and anxieties around the ‘what is it of what is’; and negative in relate to ‘symbolic violence’ where difference and critique is subordinated (Boltanski, 2011). This typically involves the indexical codification, coordination, and organization of actual and potential behaviours and events.

The relations between ‘symbolic forms’ and ‘states of affairs’ which reduce uncertainties are not formally stated in practical registers, since this would bring about possible critique of the connection between objects and the statements used to qualify them. More specifically, ‘people actively combine to remove a menacing uncertainty by ignoring differences of interpretation of what is happening...by closing their eyes to the differences of conduct that might introduce factors of uncertainty’ (61). A critical element of the robustness of institutions involves tests of reality, truth, and existence (West, 2013). Where institutions are able to bring together the symbolic and pragmatic through these tests there
is a process of ‘confirmation’, demonstrating significant overlaps with American pragmatist concerns with the connection between social construction of reality, knowledge and truth.

For Boltanski (2011) institutions can form part of the ‘regimes of domination’ that actors create so as to dominate and reduce potential critique. Boltanski (2011) identifies the two main forms of domination as ‘simple’ and ‘complex/managerial’. The former involves the institutions of reality being able to subordinate critique in social orders characterised by extreme forms of control (e.g. totalitarian). The imperative of fluidity and change deriving from capitalism underpins the latter. Change mechanisms are abstract, impersonal and beyond the reach of human laws. The role of institutions is to define ‘experts’ as only being able to define this reality of substantial change, thereby bringing together the symbolic and pragmatic. The importance of such an approach lies in the ability of dominant actors to dispel critique during times of crisis by reiterating their role and the abstract nature of capitalism, and thus leading to the continuation of existing approaches.\(^6\)

As with Lacanian-inspired post-Marxism accounts of the ‘universal’ incompleteness of the hegemonic strategies of the ‘particular’, Boltanski (2011) argues that institutions can never fully represent the complexities and fluidities of the world, thereby firmly embedding such conceptions within pragmatist understandings of the experimental nature of action and power (see Menand, 2001). In certain instances there is the possibility of greater ‘reflexivity’ and critique where institutions are not able to fully bring together the symbolic and pragmatic, and there is considerable diversity in the interpretations of actors (Cooper, 2012). Such processes are termed a ‘metapragmatic register’. Building upon Boltanski and Thevenot (2006), this comes about through both the ‘critique’ of actual tests and their frameworks, and actual institutions and the social order to which it frames. More specifically, actors question the appropriate and legitimate publicly stated relations between symbolic relations and states of affairs. Boltanski (2011) therefore suggests that critique arises when the world of complexity is re-introduced into the reality of attempted discursive control. ‘Confirmative agencies’ seeking to dominant will seek to dispel such critiques of institutions by re-iterating the ‘symbolic frame’, or ‘the whatness of what is’, involving the re-validation of meaning through statements (quasi-tautologies). These statements strive to visually express the relationship between the order of symbolic propositions and state of affairs, and thus frame their ability to control and order the world through reality, conceal contradictions, and ensure domination.

\(^6\) For Boltanski and Chiapello (2009) such tendencies have been evident in the way the spirit of capitalism has been reconfigured since the social crisis episodes of the late 1960s. Crisis was associated with the call of elements of society to be free from subordinating and homogeneous bureaucracy and corporate capitalism, but with capitalist actors subsequently internalising such critique by transforming into more cultural and artistic forms, leading to a networked/project based capitalism and new forms of culture-centred consumerism (Du Gay and Morgan, 2013). Through such means it has been possible for certain actors to dominate by subordinating critique, and bringing about exploitation.
Yet this does not subordinate actors, with critique still possible through the ability of actors to exploit the tensions between symbolic statements of reality through institutions and their physical statements through actors, and particular situations and the language where it is manifest and which can diverge significantly from the latter. Boltanski (2011) terms this the ‘hermeneutic contradiction’, of which there are two elements. Firstly, institutions are non-human and rely upon human agency as ‘spokespersons’ where they are transformed from the material to the bodiless-ness of the institution (such as the symbolic adoption of the uniform of an institution). Nonetheless, human agency is subject to the dispositions of the body, psychological conditions such as desires and emotions, experiences and interests. All of which is publicly recognised, as is the understanding that institutions are fictional arrangements depend on these human agents (Boltanski, 2011). Secondly, there is potential dissonance between symbolic and actual situations where institutions are enunciated. Such situations obviously encompass the particularities of time and space, as well featuring differing actors and points of view. Institutions are unable to become sensitive to the particularities of the situation since this would be detrimental to their very bodiless-ness, that of covering a range of symbolic and states of affairs. Correspondingly, it is impossible to produce stable realities just through a reliance on semantic devices (Boltanski, 2011). In other ways there could be an emphasis on an each of points of view rather than a symbolic stating of reality, but this will compound uncertainties and the fragmentation of ‘reality’.

There are conceptual paucities arising from this approach. Firstly, while agency is recognised as being critical Boltanski (2011) does not comprehensively conceptualise the everyday ‘self’. Such considerations are critical given Boltanski’s (2011) concern with avenues of critique stemming from the dissonance between, on the one hand, the organic (e.g. gender), psychological (e.g. emotional desires) and environmentally embedded nature (e.g. co-constitution with socio-environments, including the ‘situation’) of human agency; and, on the other hand, semantically constituted and functionally orientated institutions. Secondly, the approach tends to be more concerned with overt, tangible and oppositional forms of critique and argumentation. There is less exploration of ‘counter-conduct’ that involves alternative forms of expression beyond that of critique. More importantly, the approach does not take account of why critique does not emerge, when actors are subordinated or do not have the desire to contest existing social orders and dominating actors or social groups. It is with such issues in mind that the next section explores the role of post-Marxist psycho-analytical approaches.

**POST-MARXIST PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL APPROACHES**

Recent theorizing within the post-Marxist tradition has drawn attention to the interplay of social practices, political strategies and fantasy and affect in sustaining (and potentially unseating) hegemonic orders. Building on the seminal work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985)
which pointed to the inevitable incompleteness of symbolic orders and the role of subjective identification in sustaining them, recent theorizing draws more directly on Lacanian psycho-analysis (see for example Glynos and Howarth, 2007 and Stavrakakis, 2007, and, of course, Zizek’s considerable oeuvre). There are clear affinities with Boltanski in so far as the primary analytical concern is with the restoration and maintenance of symbolic security. Where Boltanski talks of institutions, post-Marxists talk of ideology; where Boltanski talks about effacing the intrusion of the ‘world’ on ‘reality’, post-Marxists talk about the intrusion of ‘the real’ into the ‘symbolic’(variously also referred to as ‘the other’, ‘society’, ‘ideology’ and ‘discursive formation’) and of ‘suturing the real’. The key point of difference, however, is ontological. For post-Marxists, acts of identification and ideological hegemony originate with the lacking subject, who upon entering the symbolic world of language is perpetually engaged in the recovery of pre-symbolic enjoyment, which is impossible to attain. The subject may come to identify with discursive formations, but these are also lacking and cannot offer the subject any fixed or permanent identity -recall, for example, Laclau and Mouffe’s [1985] insistence on the constitutive (im)possibility of society qua discursive formation. Faced with the other’s incompleteness, then, the subject constructs a fantasy, whose function is to explain why ordinary enjoyment is lacking and, thereby serves to ‘guarantee [the subject’s] universe of meaning’ (Glynos, 2011), a point to which we will return later in the paper. So, for Boltanski (and Boltanski and Thevenot), there is no theory of the subject as such, but rather an empirically observed desire to reach agreement7 and a number of useful concepts for analysing the various ways in which critique and justification are pursued or thwarted, again empirically derived. For post-Marxists, on the other hand, the subject emerges from lack (or absence) – the lacking subject and the lacking other. This ‘ontology of lack’ (Marchart, 2005) gives rise to a rich array of resources for explaining and hypothesising the trajectories of discursive formations in ways that can account for both contestation and its absence. One application of this vein of post-Marxism is Glynos and Howarth’s (2007) logics approach. This has recently been applied to explaining the absence of radical public contestation: first in the aftermath of the financial crisis in the UK (Glynos, Klimecki and Wilmott, 2012); and, second, in health and social care reform in the UK (Glynos, Speed and West, forthcoming). It is, therefore, worth briefly exploring its central tenets.

In the logics approach, hegemonic discourses are reinforced and sustained or contested and challenged in and through three sets of intersecting logics: social, political and fantasmatic. Social logics refer to the taken-for-granted norms underpinning a set of meaningful practices - the status quo. Political logics come in to play where social logics are problematized, which may or may not give rise to the emergence of an alternative set of social logics. Here signifying logics of equivalence and difference are mobilised to create a

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7 We should note, though, that this desire is by no means generalised to all spheres of life as Boltanski’s work on ‘agape’ (Boltanski, 2012) and Thevenot’s work on multiple regimes of pragmatic engagement shows (Thevenot, 2007).
frontier: us and them; for and against; acceptable and unacceptable and so on. Fantasmatic logics are associated with the Lacanian categories of lack, enjoyment and desire discussed above. They are what give social and political logics their ideological ‘grip’ (Glynos, 2001). ‘They make political logics compelling and they make social logics natural’ (Glynos, Klimecki and Wilmott, 2013, p. 3). Fantasmatic narratives may take various forms. They may take on a beatific form (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) in which the promise of fullness to come is offered. They make take on a horrific form (Ibid) in which a disaster scenario is set out together with a recipe for its avoidance. Common too, is the idea of ‘theft of enjoyment’ (Stavrakakis, 2007) in which an ‘other’ (not us) is assigned the role of scape-goat; the one who has stolen our enjoyment. So, discursive formations can be more or less successful, or more or less durable, depending on the extent to which they mobilise fantasy and enjoyment.

Rooted in this distinctive ‘ontology of lack’, then, the logics approach provides a solid theoretical basis for critical interrogation of processes of contestation and confirmation, including an explanation of why critique may not emerge or is readily dissipated. On the other hand, what Boltanski gives us is a set of rich empirically-derived categories for apprehending the strategies and tactics of institutional actors in this period of late capitalism. The earlier work of Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) also provide us with a rich understanding of common discursive formations, which again, have tended to be mobilised in late capitalism. We now examine the utility of these theories and concepts and the extent to which they might be combined in analysing the politics of austerity in urban contexts. We draw on a particular case, the city of Birmingham, to explore this.

THE CASE OF BIRMINGHAM

The ‘symbolic institutions’ of austerity and confirmation

Birmingham, England, is a city experiencing significant deprivation at time when it has to make budget cuts of £600m up to 2017 from a budget of £1,035.488m budget in 2013-14, and which will result in substantial restructuring of welfare services. Austerity measures are being pushed down from the nation state, but where the Coalition government has presented a ‘world’ of constraints and opportunities, which are being framed into a ‘reality’ where elements can be managed. This is clear in the adoption of market and civic values in the language and semantics of austerity, market and devolved responsibility discourses. In the first instance, the Government relates a ‘world’ of considerable challenge, but one where responsibility lies with previous administrations: ‘The Coalition Government inherited one of the most challenging fiscal positions in the world. Last year, Britain’s deficit was the largest in its peacetime history’ (Cmnd-7942 2010, p. 5). The Government has sought to
further convey economic values relating to a fiscal crisis of government and economic necessity to reduce debt in order to ensure market vitality, as well as moral values relating to a set of civic understandings of common good, such as collective service and individual obligation (Clarke and Newman, 2012). The former is notably evident in Cameron’s ‘symbolic forms’ for the need for political and social changes in response to global economic competition: “Because the truth is, we’re in a global race today. And that means an hour of reckoning for countries like ours. Sink or swim. Do or decline” (Cameron, Conservative Party Annual Conference, 2012). This then translates into the importance of market values, particularly that of the virtues of individual entrepreneurship and sacrifice: “And we here know how that is done. It is the collective result of individual effort and aspiration, the ideas you have, the businesses you start, the hours you put in” (Cameron, Conservative Party Annual Conference, 2012). Moral values relating to civil society are also particularly evident in symbolic forms of collectivist responsibility, such as in George Osborne’s claim that “we are all in this together” (Conservative Party Conference Speech, 2009).

The Coalition is seeking to enrol austerity and market and civic values into ‘practical registers’ of the pragmatics of austerity, producing new institutions that bring the symbolic and pragmatic together. Such actions are more concerned with producing ‘semantic security’ in which the identities of actors are maintained in different socio-spatial situations, namely that of being austerity-performing entities. Political strategies have been translated and codified into social practices - ‘programmes of government’ and technologies of control. This includes less central government control, budget cuts, freedoms for localities, new forms of devolved responsibility to citizens and communities, and the dominance of market-led rationalities and forms of organisation. Notable elements include less central government control which has been framed as:

‘For too long, central government has hoarded and concentrated power….It creates bureaucracy. It leaves no room for adaptation to reflect local circumstances or innovation to deliver services more effectively and at lower cost. And it leaves people feeling ‘done to’ and imposed upon….’ (Local Government and Localism Bill, 2011: p.1).

A plethora of initiatives form part of this agenda, including giving communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and providing councils with the ‘general power of competence’. Beyond the Act, other measures include ‘City Deals’ that are agreements between city authorities and the central government, involving the devolution of responsibility and resources for certain policy areas such as transport infrastructure. Deas (2013) argues that such thinking potentially opens up new spaces of autonomy, but under the heavy influence of economic growth first and foremost, rather than social equity. For Lowndes and Pratchet (2011) such symbolic frames are representative of an ideological commitment to localism and local ‘self-government’, but
that such processes are heavily mediated by austerity. Budget cuts are being framed into a practical register by way of symbolic statements, such as Cameron’s ‘Age of austerity’ discourse which framed a ‘world’ of crisis, but a symbolic reality in which this can be addressed by way of cuts:

“There are deep, dark clouds over our economy, our society, and our whole political system. Steering our country through this storm; reaching the sunshine on the far side cannot mean sticking to the same, wrong course.” (The age of austerity: Rt Hon David Cameron, April 26 2009)

“So the first and most obvious part of delivering more for less is to deliver the less.” (The age of austerity: Rt Hon David Cameron, April 26 2009)

A further critical element is that of the continuation and intensification of devolved responsibility to citizens and communities, which forms part of moral semantics around personal responsibility and civic duties (Clarke and Newman, 2012). This has been particularly evident in the decentralisation of responsibility, with certain economic incentives but not significant resources to local authorities (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013):

“radical decentralisation….will trust people to manage their affairs in a way that responds to local needs” (The Conservative Party, 2009:2)

This is manifest in the Localism Act which seeks to ‘achieve a substantial and lasting shift in power away from central government and towards local people’ (Localism Act, 2011). This includes: ‘new freedoms and flexibilities for local government; new rights and powers for communities and individuals; reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective, and reform to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally’ (Localism Act). Beyond these programmes the Coalition has enacted significant devolved responsibilities in areas of social care, including the personalisation agenda for adult social care services. A key element of such programmes is the reduction in adults eligible for state assistance, with resources targeted at only the most vulnerable. These agendas are interwoven with that of the ‘Big Society’ discourse, which while disparate in nature, is concerned with citizens, communities and third sector organisations having a greater role in the delivery of services (Smith, 2010). In reality, this is argued to mean the displacement of service and outcome responsibilities to these bodies (Andrews & Entwistle, 2010). However one should not overstate the coherence of such an agenda, recognising the conflictual nature of such symbolic frames, evident in the Young Foundation characterising the Big Society as a “loose and rather baggy concept” (Mulgan et al, 2010: 3).

Such measures however are realised through the situation, but not one of short term situations, such as in the accounts of Woodward et al (2012), but encompassing a series of actions, actors, and events which come to configure particular socio-spatial relations (see
Massey, 2005). Fantasmatic appeals are evident in the central state’s rhetoric of austerity. A political logic in which past fiscal irresponsibility is pitted against current fiscal rectitude, is undergirded by fantasies which offer both a fullness to come - ‘the capitalist project can be completed if market doctrine is fully adhered to and individuals become more responsible and self-reliant’, and a warning of disaster – ‘if we don’t tackle profligacy now, we will lose in the global race’. The question is whether these are contested at the local level or merely passed on.

What is evident in the example of Birmingham City Council is that state practical registers are appear merely to be ‘confirmed’ by senior officials at Birmingham city council. The budget statement offers a particularly powerful example of this confirmatory orientation: “There is no magic wand available and it would be a cruel deception to claim otherwise. We must by law balance the budget each year. We are not prepared to defy the law and set a deficit budget as some have urged us to do” (BCC, 2013). Such practices are further evident in terms of the need to reduce expenditure, following institutions of austerity created by the Coalition government: “...we have already reached the point where efficiency and transformational savings are no longer enough – and we have no alternative but to significantly reduce expenditure on services” (BCC, 2013). What is important in such accounts is the construction of a reality in which the Council is ‘performing’ in a crisis, as confirmed in the discursive statements of the budget statement:

“Many at the public meetings stressed the importance of getting the balance right between crisis management/protecting the most vulnerable on the one hand, and making sure that the agencies in the City work together better on prevention activity on the other. (BCC, 2012)”

What this process has also done is defend the ‘managerial domination’ of the Council through the need for change. The presentation of change has been one of abstract laws beyond the control of citizens, largely because it relates to the “world economy” and that of a “responsible council”:

“Whatever we think about the cuts, a responsible council must plan how to live within the severely reduced income we will have. Like the upheavals in the world economy, these challenges were not made in Birmingham but we have no choice but to meet them head on. Many people will have a contribution they can make and we want to work with the people of the city to find our way through these difficult times.” (BCC, 2013)

This represents an alignment of ‘symbolic propositions’ and ‘states of affairs’, reducing the possibility of critique by other actors, and where the ‘assembled’ city is symbolically aligned with socio-spatial relations of the ‘global’, although this is abstractly presented in terms of the “world economy” (BCC, 2013). This is most notable in the confirmation of a practical
register in which the Council is able to achieve progress despite cuts. Such managerial progress is achieved through prevention measures, joining ‘things up from a customer perspective, and reduc[ing] duplication’, and being able to ‘work with others who can do things more effectively and cost effectively’ (BCC, 2013). Furthermore, the Council states that is has already been able to cut budgets:

“The realities of setting a reducing budget are not new. The Council has been making efficiency savings for several years, particularly since the big reductions in Government grants began in 2010. £275m has been saved in the last two financial years alone, with the non-schools workforce reduced by 27% since April 2010.” (BCC, 2013)

Action is taking place through largely managerial practices, reinforcing the dominance of symbolic institutions relating to the ability of the Council to deliver austerity. This is most notable through the ‘Executive developing a programme of reviews…. which includes assessing the value for money and contribution to priority outcomes of each service area’ (BCC, 2013).

A number of managerial reviews are presently taking place based on assessing the value for money of services, their contribution to priority outcomes of each service area, and efforts to ensure that the Council is “fit for purpose” in the future (BCC, 2013). This is taking place through a number of green papers on various services, including education, social services and leisure centres. The Leader of the Council has discursively framed these papers in terms of austerity registers:

“These green papers are dealing with the issue of expectations….These expectations can no longer be delivered by this council.” (Albert Bore, 29th July, 2013)

Of course, ‘fit for purpose’ is essentially the discursive framing and justification for managerial-led austerity. The material manifestation of these processes is the proposals for the reorganisation of the council into larger units. Three directorates have been abolished: Homes and Neighbourhoods; Environment and Culture; and Development. They have subsequently been replaced with two new ‘super departments’: Local Services, and Development and Culture. Further processes include the devolution of certain powers to ten district Committees of councilors and officials. This includes services such as youth services, community libraries, and community safety. Such processes have led to the creation of new organisational routines and cultures. This includes, for instance, devolved responsibility to lower level officials, but who are unaccustomed to such managerial requirements. There is a need to create new organisational linkages between the executive and lower level managers and street level bureaucrats, connecting strategy and practice
(authors’ interview). Finally, the creation of large directorates culminate in certain strategic priorities dominating, reducing the potential for dissonance with that of other priorities that are being subordinated under a new regime of austerity first (authors’ interview).

The Council has conducted a public consultation in which to support such processes and thus managerial domination. They have typically utilised ‘symbolic propositions’ through consultation to support these austerity measures:

“There were large or significant majorities of on-line respondents agreeing with the proposals for this Directorate where they involved one-off savings or use of reserves, efficiencies, and seeking funding from or lowering subsidies to the NHS....” (BCC, 2013)

**Contesting austerity**

For Mayer (2013) austerity presents the possibility of greater (post-Occupy) cooperation between different social groups in anti-austerity programmes of action, with the bringing together of radical activists and ‘victims’. The possibilities of critique by actors involve exploiting the contradictions between symbolic registers and the pragmatics of the situation through ‘metapragmatic registers’, as well as the understanding of the vulnerabilities and inadequacies of ‘spokes people’ of these emergent institutions. Dissonance between symbolic institutions and state of affairs has been particularly evident in the upheaval in one of the most sensitive services areas, namely Children’s Services, where there have been four strategic directors in the last four years. Critique has come from within the Council, with Scrutiny committee chairman Majid Mahmood stating that the Services is in “meltdown and at crisis point” following the departure of strategic director Peter Duxbury, and where it is presently in Government special measures for at risk children.

Opposition Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors have described a situation in which the restructuring into larger directorates presents is a “risky way of doing things and a recipe for chaos” (Councillor Alan Rudge), particularly in the sense of issues being subsumed within larger directorate mandates. Further criticism has been discursively framed in terms of ‘empire building’ by particular senior managers as they seek to development ‘super’ directorates, thereby representing critique of ‘spokes persons’. Relating to this is criticism grounded in arguments based on the complexities of ‘states of affairs’, namely that large directorates are ‘difficult for one person to run’. There has been critique from opposition political parties in reference to the insufficient capacity and experience of the district authorities that are to get devolved responsibilities. The Conservative deputy leader stated that:
“Less than five per cent of the council’s budget is devoted to districts and 0.02 per cent to the 40 wards….The districts do not have the ability to alter contracts for refuse collection or parks and leisure services.” (Birmingham Mail, 29th July, 2013)

The managerial defence by the Council has been one in which they resort to democratic ethics: “Changes to the council constitution which were approved at the AGM effectively reduces the overall structure from six directorates to five” (BCC, 2013). There is also reference to bureaucratic procedures for addressing concerns as a private report to the committee would “deal with the process for resolving the leadership issues arising from the new structure” (BCC, 2013).

Beyond the Council critique has arisen through various interest groups but not in ways suggested by Mayer (2013), as these are typically interest groups constituted more by middle class activists. One such body, ‘Birmingham against the cuts’, appeals to the ‘world’ beyond the suffering in Birmingham in which to critique the practical register of austerity:

“There is huge tax avoidance by the rich. Children, the disabled, the unemployed, the homeless - all the people who didn’t cause the financial crisis are being made to pay for it.” (Bob Whitehead, a founding member of Birmingham Against The Cuts)

Such critiques have been denounced by the Council by way of abstract legal requirements and the ability of experts to define reality (in relation to centre-local relations and the legitimacy of democratically-elected Government): “Many contributors to the public meetings suggested that the Council should set a needs based, deficit budget. The Leader and Cabinet explained that they would not be doing this as it was illegal and would lead to central government taking over....” (BCC, 2012).

Further critique has arisen in response to perceived processes of post-democracy. One such public campaign has centred on public libraries. Campaigners have argued that the proposed ‘Strategic Management Board of the Library of Birmingham’ is unrepresentative, with the possibility of the disproportionate influence of business interests, particularly through a bias towards procurement of external services. In an open letter to the Leader of the Council the Campaigners argue that:

‘The selection of trustees with such a narrow range of business interests and ethnic backgrounds cannot take forward an inclusive vision of the Library of Birmingham as a cultural resource for all of the citizens of Birmingham.’ (Friends of the Library of Birmingham, 2013)
The semantics of contestation by campaigners have focused on a lack of civic values relating to community representativeness, but where reference moves beyond ethnicity to include monetary inequalities:

‘The future development of our Library of Birmingham should be citizen led not handed over to millionaires. It is appalling that there is no representation on the Development Board from Black and Minority ethnic communities. Their conception of the ‘Great of the Good’ of Birmingham is positively Victorian.’ (Friends of the Library of Birmingham, 2013)

In conclusion, it is clear that new institutions of austerity created by the nation state are seeking to bring together the symbolic and pragmatics of everyday life. In terms of austerity, this relies heavily upon the ‘confirmation agencies’ of the City Council where austerity is being discursively framed and enacted through practices. Where contestation has arisen it relies in reference to the pragmatics of various aspects of the everyday, such as the difficulties in enacting organisational change and devolved responsibilities, as well as the inequalities within the broader ‘world’. One could argue that to designate Birmingham City Council as purely a ‘confirmation agency’ is unfair and ignores the intricacies of contestation, resistance and circumvention. However, the actions of Birmingham City Council tend to work within the symbolic paradigm of austerity, rather than publicly contesting or circumventing these in ways that are similar to other city authorities, with one such example being Leeds where there is openly public contestation of the Bedroom Tax (Marsh, 2013). There have been slight changes to this position with the Council leader publicly calling for the NAO to examine central government’s management of funding to councils, and the future viability of local government (Smulian, 2013).

This attitude of resignation to is also evident in other areas of the Council. For example, its decision to seek to restrict eligibility for Council-funded adult social care resulted in a judicial challenge in the high court, which the council eventually lost. This, however, does not appear to have resulted in any significant change of practice, or, indeed, resignification in the politics of austerity (West, 2013). What this tentative exploration of the politics of austerity in and around Birmingham City Council appears to reveal is a political logic of confirmation in operation, playing to the managerialist trope of necessary and inevitable change. At the level of institutional actors, it may be that appeals to both beatific and horrific fantasies of the necessity for austerity are operational. At the level of the general population there is contestation, but it is easily quashed. But does this mean that institutional confirmation has succeeded in positively re-affirming the status quo or that critique has merely been displaced, perhaps finding retreat in more sinister fantasies of stolen enjoyment? This is worth considering. Here, we argue that there is merit in combining Boltanski’s rich empiricism with post-Marxist ontology and, in particular, its
theorisation of the ethics of hegemony and counter-hegemony. This aspect of post-Marxist theorising is nascent and, it must be said, controversial (Stavrakakis, 2007).

The ethics of critique

Post-Marxists insist on the ethical dimension of politics in order to counter what is perceived as the rather hollow democratic gestures of liberal democracy, which merely serve to hold hegemonic regimes in place. Glynos and Howarth, for example, draw a firm distinction between the ideological and the ethical, the distinction turning on the extent to which a subject is libidinally invested in a given fantasmatic narrative (see especially Glynos, 2008). For them what matters then is not just the normative content of fantasmatic narratives, but also the mode of a subjects’ relating to them. Fantasmatic disinvestment is the key to the development of ethical counter-hegemonic practices (or the key to untying potentially counter hegemonic practices from the dominant logic of capitalism). Where the real intrudes, fantasy serves to thwart its political potential and to sustain the status quo. These ideas are rooted in the theoretical propositions of Lacanian psycho-analysis, which is hardly uncontroversial, but the idea is also there in Boltanski’s empirically-derived propositions and in the foundational work of Boltanski and Thévenot’s exploration of processes of justification. Boltanski and Thévenot’s seminal insight, as we have discussed above, was that everyday actors possess, and seek to exercise critical faculties, and that processes of critique and justification, underpinned by a strong will to reach common agreements, are what propel the development of new discursive formations. This was powerfully illustrated in Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2006) New Spirit of Capitalism. What Boltanski’s later work has sought to address, however, is the equally powerful tendency in late capitalism for everyday critique to be suppressed. The exigencies of globalisation are in play here, in two senses. First, in the sense that its standards and conventions exert powerful pragmatic constraints on everyday actors’ capacities to critique, and where everyday experience cannot be accounted for in these increasingly narrow terms. Second, in the sense that an imagined global race justifies the managerialist change imperative, which we have already seen in operation in Coalition government statements on the necessity of austerity.

So managerial domination suppresses what for Boltanski and Thevenot are natural democratic impulses. Post-Marxists, for their part, given their post-structuralist orientation, would clearly shy away from any such attribution of natural tendencies, but, we might argue, that once the question of subjective variation is raised, there must surely be merit in

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8 It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this fully, but there are affinities here with other radical democratic approaches. For example Ranciere’s opposition of politics to police (Ranciere, 2010); Connolly’s ‘ethos of pluralization’ (Connolly, 1995) and Zizek’s ‘Communism’ (see Douzinas and Zizek, 2010).
the empirical exploration of the conditions for either ethical or ideological subjectivity.\(^9\) Here we hypothesise that where subjects are denied the outlets for the collective exploration of the norms embedded in discursive formations, such that might lead to the exploration of new discursive formations, the more they will retreat into what Boltanski and Thevenot characterise as an attitude of relativisation (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006). Subjects avoid recourse to a test of commonality by simply agreeing that ‘nothing matters’ and to ‘return to the [embodied] circumstances’ (ibid, p 340). Any effort to raise a discursive formation to the level of common good is avoided, and instead what we see are expressions of injustice from no particular vantage point. In post-Marxist terms we might characterise this as an attitude of resentment. We have a subjective disposition which has given up on the collective exploration of alternatives, and the proliferation of sotto voce (privately held but not collectively aired) fantasmatic narratives, which Glynos and Howarth (2007) suggest is the hallmark of powerful scape-goating narratives, but nonetheless offering the subject some sort of guarantee or explanation of missing enjoyment. We could go further and assert that in an urban context of super diversity such as Birmingham, plenty of candidates for scape-goating fantasies present themselves.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper presents a conceptual framework for examining the politics and practices of austerity in urban areas, and illustrated through the example of one English urban context. We argue that combining these enables us to situate French pragmatism’s empirically-derived rich set of concepts for examining processes of critique within post-Marxism’s robust theoretical framework. Such a combination enables the generation of a framework for examining the intersection of state-led austerity practices and everyday democratic practices in which individual subjectivities are at work. We hypothesise on the basis of both French pragmatism and post-Marxism and our preliminary analysis of Birmingham that a political logic of confirmation (acceptance and re-confirmation of the state’s austerity narrative) may fuel an attitude of relativisation in which the democratic exploration of a collective narrative of injustice gives way to privately held scape-goating narratives in which subjects become heavily invested. We further hypothesise that in an area of super diversity like Birmingham, there are plenty of opportunities for the development of collectively held, but more localised fantasies. In short, what we posit is a vicious trajectory of democratic decline. This may, however, be too pessimistic and here it would be useful to test an alternative scenario of virtuous democratic development where local state agents have embarked on a more challenging and oppositional course. Here, a comparative research agenda suggests itself in which the hypothesis can be tested against different local strategies and democratic traditions.

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REFERENCES


