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The institutions and heterogeneous geographical relations of austerity

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ABSTRACT

There is a general consensus that austerity is variegated in nature of austerity, but that a generic feature is the construction of discursive institutions framing the necessity for austerity and guiding actors. However, what is missing from accounts within political science and related disciplines is an appreciation of how these work through heterogeneous geographical relations. This paper examines how austerity has been discursively framed, justified and articulated through ‘semantic’ spatial austerity institutions. Utilising Boltanski’s (2011) ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’ approach, it examines the UK Government’s austerity programme. The paper finds that austerity works through spatially configured semantic institutions, and where there has been resistance this has not developed into a substantive social movement. More broadly, the paper argues that political science and public administration need to move beyond analysis of ‘singular’ geographical relations, to understanding the role of heterogeneous geographical relations characterising state practices.

AUSTERITY
RELATIONS

DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONS

CRITIQUE

GEOGRAPHICAL

INTRODUCTION

Austerity has come to dominate the political agendas and state strategies of many global north countries since the onset of the 2008 financial crisis. As with national capitalisms and neoliberal tendencies, austerity is variegated, articulated and experienced in different ways across many countries (Peck, 2012; Lodge and Hood, 2012). Despite this, a general feature is the active construction of ‘austerity’ discourses and strategies that seek to construct semantic institutions that guide actors and produce particular subjectivities, but require constant performance by actors through doings and sayings, rather than being abstract (Herrmann-Pillath and Boldyrev, 2014; Bailey et al, 2018). Nonetheless, austerity is not simply rolled-out without interaction with an inherited institutional landscape and divergent social values and practices, and with no tensions, contradictions or contestation (Worth, 2018).

What is critical in such processes is the discursive justification of austerity and performative efforts towards its political legitimisation as a means in which to guide actors within and beyond the state through informal institutions (Blyth, 2013). Moreover, there has been a neglect of the importance of spatial relations in austerity discourses in certain political science approaches. In contrast, a considerable literature within human geography argues that spatial relations are intrinsic to the actual austerity institutions being created and performed, in that institutions convey semantic meanings that are embedded within a particular spatiality, and which is of importance to their legitimisation, performativity by actors, and contestation by particular actors (Peck, 2012; Warner and Clifton, 2014; Pike et al, 2016; Fuller, 2017).

The intention of this paper is to therefore examine *how* austerity has been discursively framed, justified and articulated through efforts to construct ‘semantic’ austerity institutions by the UK

Coalition and Conservative Governments, and the importance of spatial relations in such processes. The analysis is focused on the UK Government's austerity programme from 2010 to the Brexit vote in 2016, a period which saw the substantial discursive and material enactment of austerity measures. More specifically, the empirical analysis focuses on how central governments have semantically framed, articulated and justified austerity through policy documents, press releases, speeches and national newspapers. The paper utilises Boltanski's (2011) 'pragmatic sociology of critique' approach where the onus is on the social construction of semantic institutions that seek to guide actors by way of discursively framing a particular lived reality, but where such efforts are susceptible to critique and contestation by human actors. The paper deploys a discourse analysis of efforts to semantically construct reality in relation to particular social conditions, values and ideas, and which has been used in studies adopting a 'pragmatic sociology of critique' approach (e.g. Edwards et al, 2015). In conclusion, the paper finds that UK governments have justified austerity by way of spatially configured semantic austerity institutions, constituted by various forms of justification relating to particular values, including the moral need for thrift. Where resistance has been evident it has utilised various (geographical) 'reality tests' to critique austerity, but where no major social movement has developed.

AUSTERITY, INSTITUTIONS AND CONTESTATION

Contemporary austerity accounts

There is an understanding that state austerity arrangements take many different forms, including short term policies, an 'enduring politics of austerity' favouring capital, and 'austerity polity' involving significant reorganisation of state-market-society relations (Jessop,

2016). However, there is a danger in many austerity accounts that change is viewed as working towards developing relatively homogenous and uncontested arrangements (e.g. Stanley (2016) account of UK ‘precautionary’ and ‘pre-emptive’ measures). That neoliberal tendencies are simply being reinforced as the state internalises capitalist crisis tendencies, or that austerity is a relatively legitimised activity that does not change during implementation (for example, compare Worth, 2018). What is required is far greater sensitivity to the potentially uneven development and roll-out of austerity ideas and programmes, and their interaction with inherited institutional arrangements. A critical element to this is the understanding that austerity programmes have relied upon the discursive framing of future undesirable social and economic trajectories, but where such potential crisis tendencies are described in vague terms (Stanley, 2014).

Many accounts of austerity (such as Gamble, 2015; Smith and Jones, 2015) lack concern with the heterogeneous spatial nature of the state, and the intricate and differentiated subnational governing arrangements and geographies of such policy regimes (Pike et al, 2016). As studies have shown, rescaling of fiscal consolidation responsibilities, deficit politics and devolved risk to the ‘urban’ has been critical in the implementation of austerity, but are not spatially uniform across cities and regions (Kitson et al, 2011; Peck, 2012). Such issues are critical given the variegated centre-local relations that exist between nations, and with the UK characterised by historically embedded centralism (Gardiner, 2017). In response, there have developed many accounts on the geographical relations of what are convoluted and uneven austerity programmes (e.g. Peck, 2012; Davies and Blanco, 2017; Hastings et al, 2017). While these perspectives tend to focus on the ‘urban’, they do demonstrate the uneven, heterogeneous and contingent spatial relations characterising austerity. Nonetheless, many political science austerity accounts do recognise the ‘politics of scale’ charactering the forms of austerity

implemented across mainland Europe, although understanding the causal properties of heterogeneous spatial formations is not at the forefront of their analysis.

This understanding of the differential nature of austerity demonstrates that the social construction of reality underpinning the signification of state rationalities, and how they are institutionalised, is critical. Yet, while many political science accounts inform us of the rationale for austerity actions, there is less concern with how these interventions are enacted through such performative institutions. For scholars such as Peck (2012) and Bailey (2015), austerity measures require constant legitimisation and performance, with Stanley (2016) arguing that they involve a negotiation with ethical principles relating to the need to address the desires of citizens, and the political aims of being elected through responsiveness to voters. What is critical therefore is the role of values and beliefs in informing anticipatory governing arrangements, involving the justification of particular courses of action, framing these as worthwhile, and where particular aims and social groups are considered as undesirable and requiring certain forms of action (González et al, 2017). Such legitimisation requires an understanding of the role of semantic institutions, as configured by and justifying particular values and beliefs, in guiding social life. The culmination of this is a need to go further than simply identifying austerity tendencies, to understanding how these are discursively constructed and enacted through the creation of institutions.

This relates more broadly to a lack of concern with how actors seek to mediate the impact of austerity in many accounts (Pike et al, 2016). Such processes involve substantial interaction with inherited institutional arrangements, as well as the actors and practices working through and constituting such institutions, and which has been well documented in gender-based studies of austerity (e.g. Montgomery and Tepe-Belfrage, 2016). One element of this is the potential

resistance and contestation of austerity measures. Such processes take many different forms, including circumvention, manipulation and disruption/non-disruptive opposition, and militant refusal of austerity programmes, as well as broader contestation of neoliberal subjectivities and the development of alternative values and norms of democracy (Bailey, 2015; Huke et al, 2015; Bailey and Shibata, 2017). Other studies emphasise the disparate and multiple geographical relations through which resistance works, producing spatially uneven, incomplete and contestable austerity measures, and suggesting a need for a spatially sensitive perspective of such heterogeneity (Huke et al, 2015; Bailey et al, 2017; Davies and Branco, 2017).

Semantic institutions and critique

Boltanski's (2011) 'pragmatic sociology of critique' argues that human actors attempt to define, attribute, and produce the means of social coordination and control within a heterogeneous 'world', encompassed within the concept of 'reality'. This is fragile as 'critique can always draw events from the world that contradict its logics' (Boltanski, 2011: 59). The inability of 'reality' to fully encompass the 'world' requires actors to bring about social order through the development of 'institutions'. These are semantically-based discursive formations seeking to state the 'whatness of what is' (Boltanski, 2011). Their purpose is to reduce the difference between the complexities and indeterminate nature of a lived 'pragmatic' world, and a reality they seek to control through 'symbolic' means ('practical register') (Boltanski, 2011). Institutions encompass a 'qualification' of disparate situations into a particular state of affairs that is in accordance with their values, ideals and principles (Browne, 2014). The intention of this is to produce an 'ordered' reality which removes the complexities of the world and transforms a specific situation into a 'typical situation' through various means, including narratives, codes, and rituals (Boltanski, 2011).

Semantic institutions should be understood in terms of normative historically-configured moral values that actors make reference to in the everyday, and ‘shared habits’ that individuals rely upon and perform at certain points (Basaure, 2011). In this sense, the motives, construction and practices of semantic institutions cannot be divorced from the role of broader societal values. Returning to the earlier ‘economies of worth’ perspective of Boltanski and Thevenot (2006), the actual construction of institutions is influenced by the motivations, actions and deliberations of actors, but where emergent normative values have an influence. These values legitimise action by way of their embeddedness in particular conceptions of ‘worth’ in relation to contributing to a common good (i.e. ‘superior worth’), but which are constantly constructed through knowledge production (‘tests’) in deliberative situations, and which rely on particular mechanisms (e.g. ‘forms of proof’) (Basaure, 2011) (see Table One). Orders of worth underpin various ‘worlds’, such as ‘civic’ and ‘market’ worlds, which actors refer to in everyday deliberative relations of argumentation.

[TABLE ONE]

Semantic institutions are constantly subject to re-creation and scrutiny through a ‘test’, since they are experienced in different situations by actors and because all representations of reality are partial, meaning that they can never fully represent the complexities of the ‘world’ (Du Gay and Morgan, 2013). Critique of institutions works through a ‘metapragmatic register’, focusing on the actual institutions, ‘confirmative agencies’ or processes of confirmation through a ‘reality test’ or ‘existential test’ (Browne, 2014). While the former involves testing ‘within’ dominant semantic institutions and not involving substantive critique and change, the latter is based on critiquing elements of reality that have not been previously revealed publicly, typically in response to suffering and humiliation. In both cases actors deploy normative moral

values, embedded within the orders of worth of ‘worlds’, as the basis of critique during ‘critical moments’ where differing forms of legitimacy come into conflict (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

Finally, and with the intention of moving beyond certain political science perspectives that lack sensitivity to spatial relations, there is need to understand the critical role of such relations in institutions and processes of contestation. For Thévenot et al (2000), and having been utilised by the likes of Fuller (2013), ‘worlds’ are associated with particular ‘space formations’, with such spatial relations being both a consequence and causal element of particular ‘orders of worth’ (see Table One). In essence, the ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’ approach is embedded within a relational practice-based perspective of spatial relations. The discursive and material strategies, actions and deliberative engagements of actors (re)construct, reconfigure, dismantle, and perform particular spatial relations, but at the same time as these practices are influenced by prevailing spatial relations which are the culmination of constantly emergent relational networks and the material world (Schatzki, 2010). Actors thus seek to produce and perform institutions through particular spatial relations in accordance to practical registers and ‘orders of worth’, but, where they are also influenced and constituted by prevailing institutions and their geographical relations (MacKinnon et al, 2009). This is not to suggest singular spatial relations exist within particular social situation. If multiply ‘worlds’ characterise situations, then the corresponding geographical relations are intertwined as well, with state spatiality ‘polycentric’ in nature, further demonstrating the centrality of spatial relations in the analysis of austerity (Jones and Jessop, 2010). As such, it is important to take account of various spatial relations, including socially constructed ‘scales’ (MacKinnon, 2011), relational ‘places’ (Massey, 2011), ‘territory’, and topological ‘networks’ (Allen, 2016). Taking this forward, the analysis appreciates the intrinsically spatial nature of practical

registers and orders of worth, but where various relations are enacted and performed, rather than there being a policy and political landscape of singular geographical relations (MacLeavy and Harrison, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Following Edwards et al (2015), this paper deploys a discourse analysis to examine the efforts to semantically construct reality through semantic institutions that are associated with particular political values and aims in the UK. The paper is explicitly concerned with the discourses conveyed through policy documents, press releases, speeches, and national newspapers by UK governments as they utilise orders of worth as a means to frame and justify political aims. Taking this forward, the analysis involves, firstly, examining the nature of UK state austerity discourses as a means in which to explicate the creation and basis of semantic austerity institutions. The paper collates and examines the formation of ‘semantic descriptors’ that emerge within the media and policy documents/speeches/press releases, and how they are embedded within particular ‘orders of worth’ as a means of constructing semantic institutions. Overarching semantic descriptors and particular key words and statements are identified through a database generated by NVivo software, which are then classified according to their relevance to particular orders of worth (Table 2). Utilising the quantitative analysis and academic literature, a second stage of analysis involves the qualitative examination of the importance of statements in relation to the semantic construction of austerity institutions. Having developed a corpus of semantic descriptors it is then possible to examine forms of contestation and orders of worth that have been deployed by actors (Table 3).

In terms of the actual database for the two elements of the analysis, UK national newspapers were examined as they remain a key medium in which discourses are constructed, conveyed, deliberated and contested (Entman, 2007). **Newspapers from both the left and right wing media are examined, recognising that they produce ‘frames’ and ‘agenda setting’ that are potentially biased towards particular beliefs and values, and which contribute to the construction of practical registers (see Entman, 2007; Feindt and Kleinschmit, 2011).** All examined media reports were focused on particular words which were identified through a review of academic articles on austerity, and which included but were not limited to Coalition, Conservative, Government, local government, austerity, public services, welfare, budget, cuts/reductions/savings, anti-austerity and austerity protests. The media reports were collected electronically through Nexis software, with a total of 821 articles identified from 1st January 2010 until the 22nd June 2016, and 196 discussing critique. They were examined in NVivo, leading to the various semantic descriptors identified in Table 2. Media analysis was accompanied by the examination of UK Government policy documents and press releases for various departments, and political speeches, totalling a review of 164 such sources, and which were codified and examined through NVivo, leading to the further identification of semantic descriptors.

THE CASE OF AUSTERITY IN THE UK

The ‘semantic institutions’ of austerity

The UK Coalition (2010-15) and Conservative (2015-present) Governments have utilised a variety of orders of worth in the construction of semantic austerity institutions, characterised by ‘practical registers’ of the necessity of austerity (Wright, 2016). In the first instance the

Government frames a 'world' of considerable spending challenges: 'The Coalition Government inherited one of the most challenging fiscal positions in the world' (HM Treasury, 2010, 5). The Coalition and Conservative Governments extensively articulated and justified this through industrial and market orders of worth relating to a fiscal crisis of the nation state (see Table 2). Industrial values were embedded within symbolic discourses of the state being too large and inefficient because of its breadth, and with spatial discursive formations focusing on an extensive overburdened scalar state apparatus (Jessop, 2016). The effects of this was presented in reference to market orders of worth, with a fiscal crisis framed in terms of a negative effect on international competitiveness, (Table 2) (Blyth, 2013; González et al, 2017). **These discourses were extensively adopted in right wing newspapers, with this 'agenda setting' forming the basis of much media framing of the need for austerity. Indeed, this was to become a powerful 'diagnostic' frame (Benford and Snow, 2000) of the causality of austerity, and often by way of the 'standing' of 'economists through their judgements of the importance of austerity (see, for example, The Daily Telegraph, 2012). This contrasts with left wing newspapers where the financial difficulties of the state are framed in the context of the UK Government having to respond to the 2008 financial crisis.**

Accompanying these symbolic framings were the utilisation and comparison with other territorial nation states which were already experiencing a fiscal crisis, such as Greece. This framing engaged prevailing discourses on the spatial crisis tendencies of the state and global capitalism, most notably in blaming state failure (Hay, 2011). **Right wing newspapers followed the Coalition and Conservative governments agenda setting by framing countries such as Greece as largely inefficient and uncompetitive, with austerity deriving from their irresponsibility (see, for example, Daily Mail, 2012a). This contrasts sharply with left wing newspapers that framed austerity in countries such as Greece as producing**

negative social effects, (see, for example, The Guardian, 2015). Civic, market and industrial orders were utilised in the construction of practical registers by UK Governments, linking the necessity of austerity with a ‘world’ of the failings of previous UK and other nation state actions. This is notable in relation to the discursive framing of their lack of competitiveness and inefficient scalar state apparatus, and which encompass networked and scalar spatial conceptions (see Table 2).

[TABLE TWO]

Efforts to construct austerity practical registers centred on the economic necessity to reduce debt in order to ensure market vitality, thereby engaging values around globally networked forms of spatial formation (Seymour, 2014). **Such agenda setting was particularly prevalent in the right wing media, framing austerity as a necessity in a global economy where social democratic policies are unaffordable (see, for example, Daily Mail, 2012b).** Here, Government symbolic statements utilised market values to present a ‘state of affairs’ including elements of the ‘world’ such as nation state credit ratings within complex financial markets, fluctuations of the market (e.g. oil and food prices) and competition from emergent BRIC countries (Table 2); but where these elements of the world can be addressed through austerity measures focusing on market orders of worth concerned with national competitiveness. Examples are widespread, but notable representations are Cameron’s statements on the need for 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, 2012; see also Osborne, 2016). **Yet, such diagnostic and prognostic (Benford and Snow, 2000) framing contrasts with left wing newspapers where Conservative statements are accompanied by an onus on the social consequences of**

austerity, and use markets orders to critique austerity, such as in connecting the Coalition's austerity with the economic 'slump' in 2013 (e.g. The Independent, 2014; 2015).

Austerity symbolic practices are based on the framing of a global economy characterised by complex global market 'networks' that work through, beyond and ultimately subordinate the territorial boundaries and scalar governance of the nation state (Kitson et al, 2011). However, the discursive emphasis on networks relies upon the semantic construction of a practical register involving a strong territorial and scalar nation state that is able to achieve austerity, thus emphasising the importance of Cartesian territorial spatial formation practices in regulating elements of the 'world' (Seymour, 2014). Various discursive statements explicate the fiscal credibility and strategic planning of central government, relying on industrial values relating to state efficiency and effectiveness (see Table 2). Such efforts are evident in the justification of the nation state in being able to achieve 'permanent austerity' through "building a leaner, more efficient state" (Cameron, 2013). This discursive framing represents a semantic formation of the state by way of 'industrial' principles of state efficiency through a Cartesian space over a long period of time. **Media representations of this kind, with their 'prognostic' framing of solutions, are ironically more prevalent within right wing newspapers, and often framed budget cuts as being an impetus for government departments to work more efficiently (see, for example, Daily Telegraph, 30th June, 2013).**

Yet, this was accompanied by the Coalition enacting a contradictory morality-based symbolic argument that the nation state has been irresponsible, becoming unsustainably large and debt-laden through overspending (Blyth, 2013), and utilising neoliberal pro-austerity studies (e.g. Reinhart and Rogoff, 2010). Budget cuts were framed by way of symbolic statements such as

Cameron's (2009) 'Age of austerity' discourse. This conveys a 'world' of crisis, and a new age of austerity in response to the excesses of previous national governments, involving a symbolic reality in which this can be addressed by way of austerity but requiring strong state action: "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" (Cameron, 2009). This was followed with statements on the complexities of "an uncertain world" relating to the global economic slowdown from 2015, which mean that "we need to take these difficult steps and I need to go on explaining to the public that the difficult times aren't over and we've got to go on making difficult decisions so Britain can continue to enjoy the low unemployment and rising wages we see at the moment" (Osborne, 2016).

In essence, efforts to create semantic institutions involves bringing together both market and industrial orders of worth, in which the state is uncompetitive in an uncertain world, but that it still has the efficiency and effectiveness in which to achieve austerity, and involving the reconfiguration of a scalar apparatus. Such processes are comparable to the supranational imposition of austerity across mainland Europe. The austerity taking place in southern countries was imposed through the EU-ECB-IMF 'Troika' by northern states, and included multi-scalar mechanisms such as the 'Sixpack', with explicit disciplinary tools such as 'Excessive Deficit Procedure'. Countries such as Greece were symbolically framed as overspending states, with generous welfare systems and the underreporting of state debt (Dellepiane, 2015). As with the UK, the Troika sought to construct a reality where there was a fiscal crisis of southern countries stemming from poor 'worthiness' in relation to industrial orders, and an economic necessity to reduce debt in order to ensure market vitality, thereby engaging values around globally networked forms of space formations (Seymour, 2014).

The construction, justification and legitimacy for semantic austerity institutions relies upon creating a symbolic connection (practical register) with the pragmatics of everyday life, and relates to the understanding that such ‘crisis narratives’ acquire legitimacy by resonating with prevailing spatially-orientated everyday lived experiences, such as through ‘places’ of urban and suburban affluence with few public service demands (Hay, 2011; Bramall, 2013). One such element has been the morality-based practical register of welfare benefits in times of spending constraint and that of household prosperity: “At a time when family budgets are tight, it is really worth remembering that this spending comes out of the pockets of the same taxpayers whose living standards we want to see improve” (Cameron, 2013). These Coalition/Conservative government practical registers have been justified and form the basis of the ‘symbolic’ through discourses seeking to construct a pragmatic ‘world’ of a ‘Broken Britain’, moral collapse and irresponsible families, and requiring strong disciplinary action by the state (see Table 2). Justifications for this works through ‘civic’ orders relating to a lack of moral duty to society by welfare claimants, and ‘domestic’ orders encompassing a belief in an intergenerational and territorialised culture of dependency within families and communities (MacLeavy, 2016). **Such practical registers have been widely legitimised and conveyed as a norm in the right wing media (e.g. Daily Mail, 2013), while typically being disputed in left wing newspapers where such government discourses are interpreted through stories on the negative consequences of austerity (e.g. The Guardian, 2013).**

This is accompanied by the need for citizens to make sacrifices for the common good of the nation and reduced welfare provision, embedded within civic world values around solidarity and detachment from their immediate household socio-spatial place as they are being asked to adhere to national priorities (Bramall, 2013). Through the creation of practical registers of

austerity, the Coalition and Conservative Governments sought to construct particular forms of ‘appropriate’ citizen market behaviour in their everyday lives. This involves citizens engaging and exploiting existing conditions of imposed self-help and thrift that have arisen in response to the retreat of the welfare state, and which occur within the spatial relations of the household (Worth, 2013). Such processes are evident in the efforts to symbolically connect austerity with forms of collective morality and devolved responsibility through certain ‘civic’ values, and domestic orders of worth where loyalty to the family requires greater responsibility to society and hard work (see Table 2).

Critical to such institutions of austerity is the production of ‘semantic security’ in which the identities of actors are maintained in different situations as ‘subjects of austerity politics’, be that within the domestic territorialised and topological home or engaging public services (Boltanski, 2011; Newman, 2014). Evidence from the discourse analysis finds the prolific deployment of statements stating the need for citizens to take responsibility for addressing the financial difficulties facing the country, with the most endemic statements including reference to ‘rights with responsibilities’, ‘hardworking families’, and ‘responsible families’ (see Table 2). **Such discursive (‘prognostic’) framing and agenda setting is most evident within the right wing media, while left wing newspapers tend towards more critical reflection, often judging such Government statements in relation to the unfair impact of austerity on the poorest communities. Here, we see discursive framing of the rise of poverty as welfare measures are receded, such as in the case of the growth of debt amongst carers (e.g. The Mirror, 2014).**

The legitimacy for austerity also stems from a symbolic framing of a broader societal concern around the immorality of individual household debt and irresponsible overspending by

consumers, and depends on creating an emotional link with the general public (Clayton et al, 2015). Stanley (2014), for instance, conducted a number of focus groups with the general public on their acquiescence towards austerity. He found that the ‘main source of legitimation is from telling a causal story that resonates with pre-existing (and spatially-configured) experiences and values’, such as the ‘sense that the UK needs a return of moralised prudence and obligation to counter pre-crisis profligacy’ (Stanley, 2014: 18). **Such discourses were extensively conveyed in the media by both the right and left wing media, most clearly in terms of statements such as ‘debt-fuelled consumption’ and irresponsible household overspending (Table 2).** Symbolic framing by the Coalition/Conservative Governments have sought to make the connection between, firstly, excessive debt and irresponsibility that is in opposition to individual qualities within civic orders of worth around a sense of duty to the collective good, whilst using domestic orders to frame such citizens as only being concerned with personal desires; and, secondly, the need for a new age of morally correct responsibility by both the individual and the state: "We have been living seriously beyond our means. We have to sort this out. Every sensible person knows this" (Cameron, 2010). In such symbolic statements the justification for austerity relies on bringing together the worldly pragmatics of everyday irresponsible debt by a scalar-framed household, with that of the multi-scalar and territorial arrangements of the nation state that is designated as lying hierarchically above this social unit, and where we return to concepts of managed Cartesian and ‘civic’ ‘detached’ (from individual place) space.

As part of this agenda there was a considerable Coalition focus on the symbolic framing of welfare beneficiaries (Levitas, 2012; Bramall, 2013). For Wiggan (2012), the Coalition has symbolised such citizens in terms of individual social pathologies of dependency (on state welfare benefits) and a lack of personal responsibility, and embeddedness within particular

places. Discourses have sought to produce a reality based on ‘civic’ orders of worth that seeks to talk of society being damaged by the actions of an irresponsible few, combined with domestic orders of worth around a sense of duty and loyalty to a broader societal common good in ways that are similar to the family (Table 2). **Here, we see a close alignment between Government and right wing newspapers, reflecting the strong ‘standing’ of the former in accurately identifying problems, and where the right wing press are important in the diagnostic framing of Government discourses.** Government discourses marginalised the role of globally networked structural market processes, preferring instead to semantically frame the need for the individual to fulfil responsibility around self-sufficiency as a market ‘principle’ and ‘individual qualities’ of ‘self-interest’ (Bochel and Powell, 2016). As Cameron (2008) stated, and making a symbolic connection between the individual and their social welfare and quality of life: “We talk about people being at risk of poverty, or social exclusion: it’s as if these things... are purely external events like a plague.... Of course, circumstances.... have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make”. **This has been very much a case therefore of constructing such citizens as existing within cultures dependency, and discursively framed in the right wing media through terms such as ‘Broken Britain’ (Cameron, 2008; Slater, 2014).**

Critiquing austerity

While the previous section was concerned with the efforts of UK governments to construct semantic institutions of austerity, this section examines the disparate forms of critique that has occurred within various social arenas, and how they have utilised particular orders of worth to exploit the contradictions between the practical registers of semantic institutions and the pragmatic complexities of the world (Table 3). Politicised resistance to austerity has been heterogeneous, stemming from a wide range of actors and relating to particular issues,

perceptions of social injustice and social arenas. This has taken place through formal political arenas and many (overt and covert) alternative sites, and involving different ‘reality tests’ and geographical relations (Worth, 2013, 2018; Tyler, 2013). In this period there was no overt large scale political resistance and critique of austerity characterised by prefigurative politics and ‘existential tests’ (Worth, 2013, 2018). Why this has occurred speaks to different interpretations of the historically constituted and moral beliefs of society. For Stanley (2014), public acquiescence to austerity resonates with the shared experiences of citizens (e.g. their own overspending) and their desire to return to an imagined moral obligation of prudence and ‘sharing the pain’, embedded within civic values around collective solidarity and a sense of duty, which has been fostered by the Coalition and Conservative governments (Clarke and Newman, 2012). From such a perspective it is possible to suggest that these actual citizens are contributing to the construction of austerity practical registers.

Others argue, and corresponding to accounts on a lack of resistance to neoliberalism, that contestation has been muted by an absence of organised political resistance (Bailey and Shibata, 2017). This stems from the defeat and collapse of trade unions and left-wing political parties since the 1980s, arising from the disorganisation of labour produced by deindustrialisation, and the political and social assault on such values by the ‘right’ (Worth, 2013; Harvey, 2014; Davies and Blanco, 2017). This includes the rise of ‘projective’ orders of worth, based on flexible and devolved forms of capitalism within firms since the 1970s, has undermined civic values around collective solidarity and forms of organisation (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2004). Worth (2013) and Harvey (2014) argue that contemporary resistance is often based on individual social injustices as they arise, lacking integration (as a mass movement) and coordination between different causes, and thus critiques focus on only explicating

particular contradictions in semantic austerity institutions, rather than austerity and neoliberal tendencies more broadly.

While no major forms of resistance have been evident, Bailey and Shibata (2017) identify a range of individual public resistance practises. Public opposition that is ‘disruptive’ (organised action and support from the public) centred on the bedroom tax, public sector pay, switch to wage increases linked to the Consumer Price Index, university tuition fees, VAT increase and workfare. Only tuition fees and workfare involved militant refusal (Bailey and Shibata, 2017). The mobilisation of students against the introduction of tuition fees involved relational networks within and across campuses, and their connection with pupils in schools. For Ibrahim (2014), the basis of this mobilisation and the critiques was ‘a moral economy’ geared towards a market ‘toll’ on higher education which protesters viewed as the ‘entitlement’ to an affordable education. Here, the test was in relation to the civic order of worth as students sought to emphasise the immorality of fees, and their longer term contribution to society. A further example is the ‘Bonfire of Austerity’ protests (5th November, 2013). This brought together different groups through networked space formations where there is overt judgement of austerity with the aim of fostering debate, including crossing national boundaries, and that identify austerity in both generic and nation-centred terms (Featherstone, 2015). As argued by Halvorsen (2012), the Occupy movement relies upon territoriality and embeddedness in place, but at the same time engaging global protester networks and drawing upon examples of the negative impact of austerity in other countries such as Greece.

For Theodossopoulos (2014), the basis of critique by anti-austerity groups has been to frame resistance with the ‘everyday pursuit of accountability’ through moral arguments, such as discourses on ‘local’ citizens being the victims of decision-making by ‘national’ politicians

and a bias towards elite social groups (see Table 3). Civic and domestic orders of worth have been deployed to disrupt the semantic austerity institutions that central governments have sought to create, including the failure of the state to ensure a collective good, the pursuit of individualism as a social good, and the dismantling of the tradition of a collective welfare state. Resistance can take place through indirect ‘unofficial, everyday contexts of social’, suggesting a critical role for the topological relations of actors and territorialised ‘places’ of resistance (Theodossopoulos, 2014: 501). Such moral critique was particularly evident in ‘The People’s Manifesto’ (2014), which critiques by connecting austerity in scalar governing arrangements with economic benefits for a global ‘elite’ working through global capital networks. This was presented as a juxtaposition to declining wages for ‘ordinary people’ that is comparable to ‘Victorian times’, thus situating it within the context of networked relations with global elites and capital (The People’s Assembly, 2014). Similarly, elites are critiqued through civic orders of worth as lacking relevant individual qualities in that they believe in ‘no such thing as society’ and thus ‘detached’ governing space formations, which underpins their attack on a national welfare state built by ordinary people, in contrast to public services supporting a ‘healthy and integrated society’ (The People’s Assembly, 2014).

[TABLE THREE]

Critique has been evident within the actual apparatus of the state and public service provision, particularly deriving from local government, and works through ‘politics of scale’ and topological relations, but there has not been a major ‘public’ critique in the sense of active publicly-stated resistance (see Fuller and West, 2016). Where public critique has occurred it has contested (‘reality test’) the ‘reality’ that central governments have sought to create through semantic austerity institutions. This has involved the use of morality-based arguments in which

causal processes are designated to the negative effects of global networked capitalism (e.g. low paid jobs), with territorialised states and societies having to address these consequences. Civic values of collective moral social responsibility and social justice typically characterise the critiques that have been expressed by way of the media, a central element of which is the importance of a universal holistic public service provision which is presently being diminished by austerity measures (see Table 3). One example is that of the former leader of Lambeth Council in London, Ted Knight, who argued that local government “won't make your [Coalition Government] cuts. We will not pass on the burden of the calamitous economic and financial crisis of capitalism that we did not create. We will defend our communities” (Knight, 2012). Such critiques of local government have tended to focus on the detrimental re-scalar and topological governing arrangements arising from the national government (including Cartesian space formations around greater state ‘efficiency’), and with negative impacts on general local government scale services and place-based deprived communities (see, for example, LGA, 2014; Gray and Barford, 2018).

Further critiques occur within and around central Government. Important instances include the creation of an ‘independent’ commission of ‘experts’ by Philippa Stroud, Director of the Centre for Social Justice in 2016. The Commission was tasked with constructing new poverty measures that can counterbalance Treasury-led cost-cutting priorities, which are embedded within ‘industrial values’ around efficiency and productivity improvements, and that are central to austerity institutions. Indeed, Stroud publicly stated that “When you came up to the big fiscal events, all the decisions were made predominantly through an economic lens” (Stewart, 2016). What we see therefore is a critique of such austerity practical registers through argumentative logics that rely upon industrial values, whereby the ‘worth’ of the Treasury approach in terms of contributing to a common good is flawed, and that more holistic measures

should be deployed that take account of the complexities of the everyday. As such, these are ‘reality tests’ that involve comparable methods of evaluation and calculation within the confines of semantic institutions, and not critique through an existential test in which the semantic institution is critiqued from alternative sets of values, norms and beliefs.

A general form of reality test has focused on widening inequalities arising from austerity and the ‘unfair’ impact on the ‘place’ of deprived areas (Edmiston, 2017). Critique sought to expose the discrepancies in the Coalition and Conservative governments’ symbolic statements on the benefits of austerity, and the everyday pragmatics of growing inequalities by way of civil orders of worth (see Tyler, 2013; Worth, 2013). Critiques projected through the media have included discourses on the disproportionate impact on the poorest communities, punitive measures, and unfairness (see Table 3). Civic and domestic orders of worth are notable in these critiques, including the failure of the state to ensure a collective good and the lack of loyalty to all of society (e.g. Brewer et al, 2013). Critique has also been visible between different actors in the scalar-territorial configuration of the state. Examples include criticisms by major local government figures such as Sir Steve Houghton, leader of a metropolitan English council, who responded to the closure of a welfare support programme by stating that: ‘This latest cut will take funding away from people who need it in times of crisis and is a further pressure on councils in deprived areas trying to provide for their most vulnerable residents’ (Peters, 2013). Such critiques represent attempts to semantically link austerity with negative impacts for social solidarity, connecting changes working through scalar governing arrangements with the consequences of global networked capitalism, and impacts on ‘place’ which is configured in terms of ‘deprived areas’ and the topological lived experiences of citizens lying beyond a ‘reality’ of necessary austerity (see Atkinson et al, 2012).

At the national scale welfare retrenchment intensified after the election of the Conservative Government in 2015. Following significant criticism, proposed 'Tax Credit' reforms that had been announced in July 2015, which would have reduced income levels by 50% for certain claimants and with £4.4bn of budget cuts, were not enacted following the 2015 Spending Review. Whilst accepting the need to stop the proposed reductions, the Chancellor remained adamant that the overall aims and thus moral stance (which were based on globally networked market values) were correct, that being the movement to a high wage, low benefit economy (Watt et al, 2015) (see Table 2). This was followed by significant public deliberations regarding the impact of welfare measures on the poor. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) and Resolution Foundation sought to disconnect the semantic link between (Cartesian spatial) austerity and its benefits in the long term to citizens by reducing state debt. This centred on moral claims that 4.5 million families would be worse off. The IFS argued that "long term generosity of the welfare system will be cut just as much as was ever intended, as new claimants will receive significantly lower benefits than they would have done before the July changes" (Johnson, cited in Allen et al, 2015). Critique extended beyond the moral values around social justice, to question the financial management aptitude of Osborne through industrial orders of worth, with the IFS questioning the Government's ability to meet its budget surplus aim by 2020, framing this in terms of a '50-50' chance and re-introducing the complexity of the 'world': "He is going to need his luck to hold out. He has set himself a completely inflexible target" (Johnson, cited in Allen et al, 2015). In this we can see the re-introduction of the 'world' and heterogeneous socio-spatial relations by actors as they contest austerity institutions, but such forms of critique did not lead to large scale contestation of semantic austerity institutions.

CONCLUSION

UK governments have attempted to create semantic austerity institutions, characterised by the bringing together of a discursively framed reality and the pragmatics of the everyday to produce practical registers that justify austerity. Intrinsic to efforts to create and contest these semantic austerity institutions, by way of orders of worth, are the geographical relations in which they are influenced by, realised and act through. Critical to this have been the discursive construction of a networked ‘world’ of economic complexity that cannot be controlled by the nation state. The pre-austerity nation state was symbolically expressed and justified as too extensive, debt-laden and inefficient, and thus the implications are such that the state apparatus and programmes are overly multi-scalar. Semantic austerity institutions create and seek to justify a reality where the state should reduce its spatiality through less scalar arrangements, so as to be more efficient and internationally competitiveness (Blyth, 2013). In a rather contradictory manner, however, state austerity measures rely upon the discursive framing and material enactment of a strong territorial and scalar nation state that is able to realise austerity. Symbolically linking the everyday with semantic austerity institutions also involves the ‘place’ of the household being, firstly, a site of debt and appeal to greater domestic prudence; and, secondly, as the discursive framing of dependent welfare beneficiaries, which also encompasses socially constructed ‘places’ of welfare dependency. Similarly, spatial relations are intrinsic to critiques of semantic austerity institutions as they seek to expose contradictions, such as the emphasis on the negativities arising from globally networked capitalism. Critiques have not developed into ‘existential tests’ criticising the very existence of these institutions. Rather, it has been the case that critiques have occurred within particular social arenas, encompassing the utilisation of certain orders of worth and spatial relations.

In taking this forward, geographical relations should be of critical concern when examining efforts by actors to influence social arenas through discursively framing reality. This is not to suggest that all political science perspectives fail to recognise spatial relations (e.g. exceptions include neo-Gramscian accounts such as Bulmer and Joseph, 2016), but that there should be an understanding of social action as intrinsically spatial, and the spatial as intrinsically social (Jones and Jessop, 2010; Massey, 2011). Furthermore, perspectives within these disciplines can have a tendency to treat politics, the state and polity in terms of singular spatial relations, including the assumption of the ‘territorialised’ nature of the state, and the ‘scalar’ spaces of enactment by which the state organises and acts, or completely ignores spatial relations.

In conclusion, three critical issues arise from the results of this paper. Firstly, scale is important in relation to the spatiality of the state, but as this paper demonstrates, the state and forms of critique are socially produced, produce and are imbricated with many different spatial relations (MacLeavy and Harrison, 2010). As argued by Mackinnon (2010), the focus should not be on scale per se, but its co-constitution with the politicised actions of actors and their strategies. It is also clear that spatial relations do not work in isolation but in (uneven) combination, as is evident in the co-constitution of various geographical relations in the justification and critique of semantic austerity institutions (see also MacLeod and Jones, 2007). As argued by Jones and Jessop (2010), scholars should examine ‘polymorphic’ spatial relations in particular geographical and temporal contexts, but where there is no prior assumption about what spatial relations are in operation as elucidation comes about through empirical analysis. Finally, recognition of polymorphic spatial relations and the conclusions of this paper that austerity institutions are semantic constructs, follows relational perspectives of the state as ideationally and materially produced and unbounded. What is critical in taking forward such an approach is to place the socio-spatial deliberative ‘practices’ of the unbounded state as central to analysis,

recognising that actors utilise various discourses (e.g. orders of worth) in negotiations that have material consequences, and that the material influences discourses. Such a dialectical approach would move us beyond perspectives that overly conceptualise the state in terms of either discursive representations, or as a material construct (see Marcus, 2008).

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Table 1: Orders of worth

'Orders of worth'	Inspirational	Domestic	Opinion	Civic	Market	Industrial	Projective	Green
Superior principle ('worth')	Inspiration, originality	Tradition, loyalty	Judgement of others	Collective good	Competition, price, cost	Effectiveness, efficiency, performance	Short term projects, Flexible networking	Environmental friendliness
Test	Introspection, solitude	Family, ceremonies	Setting up public debate	Demonstration in favour of moral causes	Market competitiveness	Rational tests	Ability to move from project to project	Sustainability, renewability
Forms of proof	Emotionally invested body or item, the sublime	Oral, personally warranted	Sign, media	Formal, office	Monetary	Measurable: criteria, statistics	Network connectivity	Ecological ecosystem
Specific investments	Risk	Sense of duty	Pursuit of publicity	Renunciation of personal interests, dedication to solidarity	Search for personal opportunities	Investments in progress	Long term aims of the company to the detriment of a private life	Environmental protection
Time formation	Eschatological, revolutionary, visionary moments	Customary part	Vogue, trend	Perennial	Short term, flexibility	Long term planned future	Short term	Future generations
Dominant spatial formation	Presence, topological	Social proximity of place	Communication network	Scale, Territorial, Topological	Globalisation, networks topological	Cartesian space, Territory, scalar framing	Flexible global networks	Planet ecosystem

Source: Adapted from Thevénot et al (2000) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2007)

Table 2: Semantic descriptors and orders of worth of austerity institutions

Semantic descriptors	Key words and statements	Order of worth	Frequency	
			Media reports	Policy documents/ Speeches/ Press releases
Blame on previous government for fiscal crisis	Irresponsible, excessive borrowing, state overspending, high taxation, economic chaos, inefficient, mismanagement	<i>Civic values</i> – immoral overspending and debt <i>Market values</i> – uncompetitive, rising costs of the state <i>Industrial values</i> – inefficient state programmes, poor measurement mechanisms	105	19
Fiscal crisis of the state	Excessive public debt, state overspending, unsustainable, economic emergency, bankruptcy	<i>Market values</i> – uncompetitive, rising costs of the state <i>Industrial values</i> – inefficient and ineffective state apparatus because of its breadth, long term austerity planning to ensure state sustainability	160	26
Comparison with indebted countries	Greece, Portugal, Spain, crisis, slump, living standards, stagnation, incompetence	<i>Market values</i> – uncompetitive, rising costs <i>Industrial values</i> – inefficient state programmes, poor measurement mechanisms	45	9
Global economic competition and uncertainties	Eurozone weakness, high global oil and food prices, strong pound, BRIC competition, low taxes, long-term economic plan, hard work, credit rating	<i>Market values</i> – competitiveness, rising state costs, market costs arising from taxes	60	19
Strong territorial and scalar nation state	Fiscal credibility, Coalition and Conservative economic strategy, Fix Broken Britain	<i>Industrial values</i> – efficient and effective state apparatus and programmes	125	31
Citizens need to make sacrifices	Long term sacrifice, long term commitment, Joint suffering, living within their means	<i>Civic values</i> – work towards a collective good	64	14
Welfare beneficiaries as culprits of their poverty, and the social pathologies of dependency	Broken Britain/Society, welfare dependents, welfare costs, moral collapse, irresponsibility, high-claim families	<i>Civic values</i> - failed sense of moral duty to society by the poor <i>Domestic values</i> – tradition of welfare dependency within families and communities	95	15
'A new morality' requiring punitive action	Rights with responsibilities, hardworking families, responsible families, social fightback	<i>Civic values</i> - sense of greater moral duty to society by the poor, replace individualism with solidarity <i>Domestic values</i> – loyalty to family requiring greater responsibilities to society and hard work	80	18
Immorality of individual household debt and irresponsible overspending	Debt-fuelled consumption, household debt and overspending, irresponsible credit card debt	<i>Civic values</i> - failed sense of moral duty to society <i>Domestic values</i> - concern only with personal desires	87	13

Note: The sample included the following newspapers: The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Financial Times, The Daily Mail, The Express, The Sun, The Mirror, The Observer, Sunday Times, Sunday Mirror, The Sun on Sunday, The Mail on Sunday, Sunday Express and Sunday Telegraph.

Note: Policy documents included strategic plans, single departmental plans, business plans and improvement plans over the period 2010/11 to 2015/16.

Table 3: The semantic descriptors and order of worth critiquing austerity

			Frequency in media reports
Semantic descriptors	Key words and statements	Order of worth	
Everyday pursuit of accountability	Citizens as victims of government, vulnerable citizens most affected, government bias towards 'elite' and corporations, threat to democracy	<i>Civic values</i> – failure of the state to ensure a collective good, pursuit of individualism rather than solidarity <i>Domestic values</i> – tradition of welfare state being dismantled, loss of loyalty to all of society	82
Critique within state apparatus/ Sense of local government duty/ Overt resistance by local government	Moral and statutory obligations, social justice, increasing social demands, protecting the most vulnerable	<i>Civic values</i> – work towards a collective good, solidarity, and sense of duty to all	73
Unfair impact on the place of deprived areas	Disproportionate impact on the poorest communities, punitive measures, unfairness, rising inequalities	<i>Civic values</i> – failure of the state to ensure a collective good <i>Domestic values</i> – tradition of welfare state being dismantled, loss of loyalty to all of society	41