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Abstract:

What are the conditions under which the meaning of the signifier ‘austerity’ might be reworked for environmental ends? Could the concept of ‘austerity’ describe a mode of living that is compatible with the challenges of working towards transition and degrowth? This article considers what can be learnt from the UK context, in which social actors in environmental and transition politics have – since the early 2000s –elaborated a concept of ‘eco-austerity’. This has been achieved via the mobilization of a particular historical period as symbolic resource: the period 1939-54, an era widely known as ‘austerity Britain’. Through an evaluation of this activity, the article identifies the significant challenges presented by a project of recasting the meaning of the signifier ‘austerity’, as well as the possibilities for alternative future-making that may yet be associated with this concept.

Keywords: austerity; transition; eco-austerity; austerity Britain; degrowth; rationing

**Introduction**

In current political discourse, ‘degrowth’ and ‘austerity’ are regularly presented as policies that must be sharply differentiated. In a paper written for Attac Germany,[[1]](#footnote-1) Alexis J. Passadakis and Matthias Schmelzer insist that ‘your austerity is not our degrowth!’ (2010), while the Le Parti Pour La Décroissance (the Degrowth Party of France) has been construed as promising ‘degrowth without austerity’ (de Saint-Do, 2013). Aurélie Maréchal, director of the Green European Foundation, asks:

Should Greens be in favour of austerity? No, because austerity uses the pretext of scarce (monetary only) resources to impose policies that increase inequalities and poverty while failing to resolve environmental issues. (Maréchal, 2012)

In a context in which mainstream critical thinkers are increasingly identifying neoliberal capitalism as the obstacle that is preventing meaningful action to combat climate change (Klein, 2014), and austerity policies are widely understood as a ‘neoliberal trick’ (Blyth and Mills, 2013), it is entirely clear why those invested in green politics or the politics of degrowth should want to make this distinction. Yet the vehemence with which these actors seek to differentiate degrowth and austerity (that exclamation mark after Passadakis and Schmelzer’s assertion!) indicates that they might be policing a distinction between two concepts that cannot, in fact, be entirely disassociated.

Indeed, there are other voices who have argued that ‘austerity’ is a critical concept with which advocates of degrowth must engage. Ernest Garcia, for instance, argues that through its association with the economic and ideological practices of neoliberal governments in the wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis, the concept of austerity has been ‘perverted’. He notes that in political philosophy ‘austerity’ describes a policy of maintaining that which is socially ‘necessary’ at the expense of that which is ‘superfluous’, while in the current context austerity policies appear to achieve the very opposite. There is a pressing need, Garcia insists, to recover and to elaborate a concept of austerity for environmental sustainability and for well-being – a concept of austerity for degrowth (Garcia, 2013).

Other key advocates of degrowth have developed a distinct but related argument. Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (2014: 220) reject the tainted concept of ‘austerity’, calling instead for individual ‘sobriety’ alongside socialized ‘dépense’ – a ritual destruction of accumulated surplus. The ‘sober subject of degrowth’ that they envisage ‘does not aspire to the private accumulation of things’; freed from the ‘unbearable weight of limitless choice’, this sober subject finds meaning in social relations, while social dépense is the outcome of collective decision-making about what to ‘waste’. Thus for D’Alisa et al., personal sobriety and social dépense are intended to replace the pairing of social austerity and individual excess that predominates in contemporary neoliberal societies.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What are the conditions under which the meaning of the signifier ‘austerity’ – as well as cognate phrases such as ‘living within our means’ and ‘less is more’ – might be reworked for environmental ends? Could the concept of ‘austerity’ describe a mode of living that is compatible with the challenges of working towards transition and degrowth? In what follows I consider what can be learnt from the UK context, in which social actors in environmental and transition politics have – since the early 2000s – elaborated a concept of ‘eco-austerity’. This has been achieved via the mobilization of a particular historical period as symbolic resource: the period 1939-54, an era widely known as ‘austerity Britain’, when a system of rationing was imposed in the UK. Through an evaluation of this activity, the article identifies the significant challenges presented by a project of reworking the meaning of the signifier ‘austerity’, as well as the possibilities for alternative future-making that may yet be associated with this concept.

The article begins with a narrative of the emergence of a historically inflected eco-austerity discourse in the UK in the period before the 2007-8 financial crisis. I will identify some of the key social actors in environmental and transition politics who have perpetuated this discourse, and explain why the period of austerity Britain has been a valuable symbolic resource in this context. Turning to the struggle over this symbolic resource that took place in the wake of the financial crisis, I will identify the ways in which neoliberal social actors have made use of the same period of history. I will elaborate in particular a certain argument that the turn to a discourse and practices of austerity in green politics may have smoothed the way for the UK coalition government’s economic austerity policies. I conclude by drawing out the challenges this case study implies for a broader project of reconstructing the concept of austerity.

**The rise of ‘eco-austerity’**

The idea that there is an analogy to be drawn between the present conjuncture and ‘austerity Britain’ began to be communicated some years before the financial crisis. Since the early 2000s, this historical period – and specifically the era of the Second World War (1939-45) – has been an important point of reference in environmental politics (Hinton and Redclift, 2009; Randall, 2009; Bramall, 2011; Ginn, 2012). There is a rather longer history of the emergence of ‘war’ – as in ‘the war on climate change’ – as a central metaphor in environmental discourse and politics (Massumi, 2009; Dibley and Neilson, 2010) and the turn to the Second World War in particular can be seen to build on this metaphorical language (Cohen, 2011).

In the UK, the policy institute the New Economics Foundation (NEF) – which is part of the Schumacher Circle of organizations[[3]](#footnote-3) – has been a key actor in the promotion of this analogy, driven in particular by the work of its former policy director, Andrew Simms. In publications authored by Simms, the use of the rhetoric of war becomes more concrete and more literal. In a pamphlet titled *An Environmental War Economy* (2001), Simms argues that Britain’s experience during the Second World War is highly relevant to the challenge of climate change (2001: 31). The specific actions taken and practices condoned in this context – the exemplar of the ‘war economy’, rationing and ‘fair shares’ – are a significant dimension of this relevance. More important, however, is the availability of a certain narrative about people’s accommodation of these sacrifices – the ‘myth of the home front’[[4]](#footnote-4) – that enables the Second World War to function as a powerful rhetorical resource.

Simms’s influence, and in particular his attempt to construct austerity Britain as a model for sustainable consumption, is clearly evident in several of NEF’s later projects and publications. In 2009, the organization commissioned a performance piece titled ‘Ration Me Up’, staged by ‘The Ministry of Trying to Do Something About It’. A home front ‘rationeer’ dressed in 1940s clothing handed out wartime-styled ‘ration’ books containing one month’s ‘equitable carbon ration’ in the form of coupons for various energy-consuming activities. The aims of the project were to show participants their ‘fair share of the world’s resources’ and to provide them with a way of minimizing their ‘impact on the planet’ (The Ministry, 2009a). A few years later Simms authored a report for the UK’s Green Party titled *The New Home Front* (2011), which explores how Britain can learn from its wartime past in an age of climate change and energy insecurity. Noting that there are ‘few historical precedents’ for the transition to a low carbon economy, Simms argues in this publication that ‘the example of wartime Britain is exceptional, instructive and illuminating’ (2011: 14).

These projects seek to construct an analogy between the war economy of the austerity Britain era and a low carbon economy. At the same time, other actors in the environmental movement have found value in the *practices* that civilians were encouraged to take up during the period of war and rationing. These practices include recycling, growing vegetables, mending, repairing, and other activities that have been valued as part of a ‘great re-skilling’ for transition (Simms and Potts, 2011; Transition Network, 2014).[[5]](#footnote-5) The revival of popular slogans from austerity Britain – most notably, ‘dig for victory’ and ‘make do and mend’ – has served to give new meanings to these practices and to attach value and significance to them. I will outline the revival of ‘dig for victory’ in more detail in order to indicate how this process of attaching new meanings to familiar practices has been achieved.

The ‘dig for victory’ campaign was instigated in 1939 as part of the war effort, with the aim of encouraging British citizens to grow their own vegetables and become more self-sufficient. A similar campaign was conducted in the United States, where the practice is known as ‘victory gardening’. In both national contexts, the idea of digging for victory has persisted into the postwar era (Bentley, 1998: 172; DeSilvey, 2003: 454), and has been articulated to different debates and themes during this time. In the 1990s, a UK-based land activism group became one of the first groups to use the slogan ‘dig for victory’ in the context of an environmental campaign, and specifically to stimulate debate about land use and access (Crouch and Parker, 2003: 403). Over the next decade or so, the idea of ‘digging for victory’ was picked up by many different social actors working towards diverse projects and objectives. These contexts ranged from the allotment movement[[6]](#footnote-6) and urban agriculture to sustainability education in schools.[[7]](#footnote-7)

‘Dig for victory’ resonates with a very wide range of projects, and so its politics are complex. In class terms, for instance, the democratic nature of the wartime campaign – the notion that all kinds of people got involved – has clearly been valuable to a number of social actors. Linked to allotment keeping, the slogan opens up the connotations of that practice beyond the culture and stereotypes of ‘working-class agitation’ with which it has been associated (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 18; see also Hope and Ellis, 2009: 5). By contrast, the ‘dig for victory’ campaign has also been an appealing resource for an organization such as the Soil Association, which champions organic food and thus can be perceived as being ‘for wealthy, middle-class people’. The Association’s call for a ‘revival of the “dig for victory” ethos’ communicates a shift in emphasis away from exclusive organicism and towards a ‘local and sustainable’ agenda (Hickman, 2008: 33).

‘Dig for victory’ can be articulated to a wide range of policy areas and outcomes. The act of imagining a historical precedent for the present conjuncture opens up a space in which some of today’s most critical environmental demands have been articulated and linked together: concerns about ‘food miles’ to questions about quality of life, ideas about nutrition and healthy eating to the demand for land in common, and a valorization of social interaction to the concept of sustainability. In this sense, ‘dig for victory’ has become a critical nodal point in contemporary discourses about sustainability, and has been recognized as such by policymakers. The authors of a local government report on allotments argue that ‘[a] new “Dig for Victory” would be a dig for scores, if not hundreds, of victories across a range of policy areas’ (Hope and Ellis, 2009: 28).

**History as symbolic resource**

What can this case study tell us about the project of giving new meaning to the signifier ‘austerity’? The popularization of the comparison between austerity Britain and today’s climate crisis provides an example of a reworking of ‘austerity’ to signify an economy and practices that are oriented towards environmental sustainability and well-being as opposed to economic growth. In this case, the recourse to history as a symbolic resource has been central to the process of creating a new meaning for austerity. While the past is not the *only* symbolic resource that is available for such a task, it is a particularly valuable resource, for a number of reasons that I shall now elaborate.

First, this historical era is one that is very *familiar* to UK citizens; as others have documented, the Second World War has a weighty presence within British cultural memory (Eley, 2001; Noakes and Pattinson, 2013). Simms’s confidence in mobilizing this resource is founded in his sense of the potency of the historical era in the British cultural imaginary; he describes it as ‘living history’ (Simms, 2013: 13). Within the transition movement there is a strong sense that the skills and knowledge we require in order to respond to peak oil and climate change are not new ones but ‘skills that our grandparents took for granted’ (Transition Network, 2013b). From this perspective austerity Britain represents a valuable rhetorical resource for the communication of environmental objectives because it can be constructed as ‘a regime resembling sustainable consumption’ that remains in living memory (Theien, 2009). Making reference to the *Transition Handbook* (Hopkins, 2008), Nick Stevenson explains that for its author, Rob Hopkins, memories of the ‘dig for victory’ campaign ‘need to be recovered to shatter the idea of “normality” fostered by the dominant consumer economy. By reminding us how previous generations lived, we are being asked to begin to imagine how a less hazardous life style may be possible’ (Stevenson, 2012; 72).

Second, austerity Britain offers a *precedent* for some of the policies and practices that environmental social actors endorse. Presenting the Second World War as a precedent for pro-environmental action allows Simms and others to assert that the policies he proposes *can* work, and to fend off the argument that people will not – for example – accept controls on consumption (Simms, 2001: 32-3). In his book *How to Save the Planet*, Mayer Hillman uses historical analogy in a similar way to establish that carbon rationing is achievable and comprehensible (Hillman with Fawcett, 2004: 143). Relatedly, the imagery of rationing in austerity Britain provides social actors with a way of rendering intelligible the idea of a limited but fair allocation of resources.

Third, precisely because wartime and austerity Britain is such a familiar historical period, it is a reference point that can be recognized by many *different constituencies* in Britain today. The story that is told about this historical period is not in the least challenging – on the contrary, eco-austerity discourse reiterates a unifying, dominant-hegemonic narrative of British resilience, resourcefulness and triumph against the odds. I have argued elsewhere (2013) that these kinds of stories might prove valuable for the communication of political visions that can seem challenging from the perspective of certain social groups. These intransigent constituencies need to be persuaded of the legitimacy of the need for transition and environmental action. The narratives and discourses that are required for this task are those that resonate with these constituencies, and specifically with the way that they presently construe their interests. Dominant-hegemonic history, like the story of Britain’s resilience in the Second World War, constitutes such a resource precisely because it is already available, *already common sense* (Bramall, 2011).

Fourth, the vision of life in austerity Britain that eco-austerity discourse perpetuates is one that has proved highly *appealing* to certain constituencies in the UK. This is perhaps surprising, given that we are talking about a period that demanded extreme hardship and sacrifice. Yet an austere way of life has been recast as one that has appeal through an emphasis on alternative sources of pleasure. In eco-austerity discourse, an austere life means buying something only if you really need it, preferring to buy second hand goods, and ‘making do’ if what you need isn’t available; it involves ‘reskilling’, or learning how to sew, knit, mend, repair, conserve, preserve and bake; it means cycling or walking instead of driving; it involves spending more time being outdoors, and perhaps more time with family and friends. These alternative ways of living one’s life are constructed, in eco-austerity discourse, as more pleasurable, rewarding, and conducive to well-being than the consumerist practices that they replace; they promise ‘more’ from ‘less’.

This foregrounding of the pleasures of an ‘austere’ life resonates in some respects with the philosopher Kate Soper’s principle of ‘alternative hedonism’. Explaining this principle, Soper argues that ‘new forms of desire, rather than fears of ecological disaster’ will be ‘the most likely motivating force in any shift towards a more sustainable economic order’ (Soper, 2009: 3). In endorsing alternative hedonism, Soper does not have eco-austerity in mind. On the contrary, she appears to reject the idea that austerity or frugality might constitute emergent objects of desire and sites of gratification (2008: 578; 2009: 5). Some commentators have responded to Soper’s argument as if it were self-evident, reiterating the case against what they call ‘hairshirt puritanism’ (Lawson, 2009; Scott Cato, 2009). Yet within eco-austerity discourse, it has proved possible to construct a concept of austerity that has become an object of desire to some, through an emphasis on the rewards of doing more with less (Bramall, 2013).

I have explained how the activities of certain actors in environmental politics in the UK have led to the construction of a new meaning for austerity – or ‘eco-austerity’ – and offered some reasons as to why that meaning has resonated with significantly wide constituencies. In the next section of this article I will continue to document the emergence of new meanings of austerity, turning this time to the wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis. Despite the apparent success that actors in environmental politics can claim for remaking the concept of austerity via the resources of austerity Britain, this meaning of austerity has subsequently been sidelined, with key actors such as Simms recognizing that the ‘whiff of [economic] austerity’ has made it harder to make the case for ‘less is more’ (Simms, 2013: 312). In the final part of this article I will draw out some of the reasons why this has happened, reasons that indicate significant challenges for any project that seeks to remake the concept of austerity.

**Securing consent for economic austerity**

In the immediate wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis, the UK’s Conservative Party sought to win the forthcoming general election by positioning themselves as the only party who would manage the economy ‘responsibly’. David Cameron’s speech to the Conservative Party Spring Forum (2009) began to elaborate this construction via a promise that the ‘age of irresponsibility’ (that is, of the Labour Party’s tenure) was ‘giving way to the age of austerity’, and that a Tory government would deliver ‘more for less’ (Cameron, 2009). It is no surprise, then, that reference to austerity Britain – the same historical period that environmental actors had been using as a symbolic resource – quickly became integral to the Conservative Party’s rhetoric of economic austerity, and later to the coalition government’s justification of cuts. Conservative and neoliberal actors have drawn on this historical period to secure a notion of economic austerity as a highly *moral* policy (Cameron, 2009; Osborne, 2009). Calling forth a dominant recollection of the war as a time of ‘national unity’ (Noakes, 1988: 6), historical analogy has been used to summon up ‘a nation united in the face of adversity’ (Clarke and Newman, 2012: 303) and to lend weight to the argument that ‘we are all in this together’ (Cameron, 2010). For this reason, commentators on the political left have observed that history has served as a critical symbolic resource in the task of securing the nation’s consent – or at least acquiescence – to the coalition government’s ideological and economic austerity agenda. Historical precedent has been used to reinforce a logic of ‘doing more with less’ that has facilitated the further marketization and neoliberalization of public services. As Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn have argued, approving mobilizations of ‘historical lessons’ from the austerity years have informed a ‘public reassessment of citizens’ current and future prospects’ (Biressi and Nunn, 2013: 170).

These ‘historical lessons’ have become highly visible as a certain vision of austerity Britain has become mainstreamed in British media and consumer culture. Routed via ‘[v]intage, nostalgia-led marketing, and retrochic’ (de Groot, 2009: 10), the idea that austerity Britain offers a historical precedent for contemporary times has been widely disseminated, and there has been a surge of popular fascination in this period of history. The historical analogy between past and present has been reiterated in texts and contexts that include exhibitions, television programmes, magazine articles, recipe books and advertising. In these texts and contexts the style and iconography of the home front and the postwar austerity years are evoked through many of the same aesthetic elements revived within environmental campaigning, including the propaganda slogans ‘dig for victory’ and ‘make do and mend’.

The high level of saturation that this historical period has achieved in contemporary media culture has met with significant criticism from commentators on the left. Critics have blamed a culture steeped in nostalgia for austerity Britain – and enamoured of its affects, style, and ‘consolatory aesthetics’ – for promoting ideological compliance to a neoliberal vision of the future (Hatherley, 2009). The coalition government is perceived to have ‘seized the opportunity’ presented by ‘austerity nostalgia’ to assert that ‘doing without [can] be an occasion for virtue and health’ (Seymour, 2013); in short, nostalgia has been used to ‘sell us austerity’ (Williams, 2015).

**Eco-austerity, co-opted?**

I have described two visions of the future to which ‘austerity’ and the resources of the past have been articulated: one that imposes austerity for neoliberal ends, and the other that embraces austerity for transition and degrowth. While these orientations are clearly distinct, the symbolic resources they deploy are shared, and these resources have become widely disseminated in consumer culture. Some of the practices that austerity discourse recommends – sewing and mending, for instance – have different ideological resonances, depending on the futures to which they are articulated. What consequences, then, does the mobilization of austerity Britain for neoliberal interests have for the eco-austerity discourse that I outlined above?

At a certain moment in the financial crisis, it seemed to many commentators as if the state of the global economy would only confirm the rectitude of anti-consumerist and environmental arguments. As David Evans notes (2011: 550), there has been a tendency within green politics to regard economic instability as ‘emblematic of a more extensive process of structural reorganisation’ in which ‘ecological transition’ can be achieved ‘through austerity’ (Cohen, 2012: 24). Reading the conjuncture optimistically in the wake of the financial crisis, the political commentator Neal Lawson argued that the recession was ‘opening up spaces for new ways to live and be free’ (2009: 241). Yet this hasn’t proved to be the case, and in the struggle over austerity’s meaning, a neoliberal, pro-growth vision has ‘won out’. As the director of NEF Stewart Wallis put it recently, ‘when the financial crisis exposed plainer than ever the failings of today’s economic status quo, it wasn’t our vision that rose out of the ashes’ (Wallis, 2014).

I use the notion of a struggle deliberately, in order to identify austerity as a concept which divergent political interests, occupying a shared political terrain, have sought to ‘own’, and to draw attention to the fact that the rise of eco-austerity discourse has a relationship to the currently prevailing discourse of economic austerity. While there has been very little recognition of the extent to which meanings of austerity and uses of the past connect and compete in the current conjuncture, several identifiable arguments have been made about the influence of eco-austerity discourse on the prevailing rhetoric around economic austerity. These arguments are worth discussing in more detail, as they raise issues that are highly relevant to the challenge of reconstructing the concept of austerity.

We can begin with a certain appraisal of eco-austerity that issues from an anti-environmentalist, politically libertarian position. Making reference to the fact that austerity was a significant concept in green politics long before the coalition government began to develop their own rhetoric of austerity, Neil Davenport (2009) argues that ‘the green champions of poverty […] helped to popularize a malign framework through which the recession is now being discussed’. Brendan O’Neill (2008a; see also 2008b) attributes a lack of debate about ‘the need for belt-tightening’ to ‘a wide-ranging political consensus […] that people’s material desires must be restrained’, a consensus that he asserts was already in place before the financial crisis. The argument that these commentators pursue is that the turn to practices of austerity in green politics smoothed the way for the government’s (economic) austerity policies. In establishing a connection between the notions of responsibility, sustainability, thrift and austerity, the popularization of eco-austerity discourse facilitated a claim about the morality and necessity of spending cuts (Bramall, 2013).

Tracey Jensen has developed a more sophisticated reading of this discursive development that is also sympathetic to the original motivations of those actors in green politics who have sought to endorse practices of thrift and austerity. Jensen notes that practices of ‘new thrift’ have become popular amongst the affluent middle-classes in the UK – those minimally affected by the impact of the spending cuts. She argues that these practices may ‘draw on older environmental and ecological countercultures and principles, but they are articulated in distinctly new ways’:

‘New thrift’ promises that it is not only possible to survive on less, but also that we will be happier as a result and that we will reconnect with moral virtue and discover new kinds of value that are not predicated on consumption and extravagance. ‘New thrift’ is a reinvention of frugality for the neoliberal generation (Jensen, 2013: 64).

For Jensen, the new cultural politics of austerity feeds off meanings of austerity and thrift generated in green politics, but no longer has very much to do with these principles. Her analysis is not a critique of anti-consumerism per se, but of how this orientation, when communicated via a neoliberal politics of thrift, can serve as a means of circulating ‘pathologies about the “wrong” kind of […] consumption’ (2013: 65). In the context of economic austerity, she argues that thrift has been ‘reinvigorated as a source of cultural value’, and has become ‘a site where classed Others are produced and symbolically shamed for not being austere enough’ (2012: 15).[[8]](#footnote-8)

These readings of the relationship between discourses of eco-austerity and economic austerity are in certain respects rather limited. They tend, first of all, to assume that environmental or transition-oriented concerns have *already been residualized* (or largely put aside) in the practices and discourses of austerity that they seek to critique. These practices and discourses are viewed instead as necessarily reflective of dominant political-economic interests and therefore as fostering ideological compliance. The problem here is that this argument tends to obscure the antagonism towards dominant neoliberal interests that eco-austerity or a politics of thrift continues to present. Even in those cases where eco-austerity practices are adopted primarily as a means of generating class distinction – for instance, in a context where a middle-class family blogs about their efforts to become self-sufficient in a mode that is highly judgmental of others’ consuming practices – those practices continue to be aligned with a politics of transition or degrowth rather than the dominant orientation towards economic growth.

A second and related limitation of these readings is that they tend to assume that an environmental or transition-oriented politics is (or often can be) *hostile* to the interests of ordinary working-class people. This attitude is evident in the libertarian Marxist perspective I cited earlier, in which ‘eco-austerity’ is aligned with the hegemony of liberal environmentalism, and is attacked as a ‘tool of political oppression’ heralding ‘war-style cuts in people’s choices and living standards’ (O’Neill, 2008a). Just as they obscure the continuing antagonism towards an ideology of degrowth that eco-austerity presents, these commentators arguably fail to take account of the centrality of principles of social justice and equality within the degrowth and transition movements. As Ernest Garcia has argued, austerity for degrowth requires more, not less, equality (2013; Suryawinata and Maas, 2012). While it must be recognized that certain expressions of eco-austerity can work to consolidate class distinction, many eco-austerity-inspired interventions – such as those initiated by the New Economics Foundation – are oriented towards greater social equality, as well as towards environmental sustainability. As my discussion of the discourse of ‘digging for victory’ demonstrated, the historical period of austerity Britain can be used as a symbolic resource that opens up participation in transition-oriented activities to diverse constituencies. The mindset exemplified in O’Neill’s critique of eco-austerity discourse, in which the protection of ‘hard-won privileges’ is primary (Ross, 2009: 9), is one that prevails in many strands of left politics. A longstanding hostility towards political projects that appear to endanger these privileges is surely one of the most serious obstacles that any attempt to remake the concept of austerity will have to confront.

It has to be recognized, however, that the criticisms Jensen develops of austerity culture and the ‘new thrift’ are significant ones. As Sarah Marie Hall (2015: 145) emphasises, it is inappropriate and insensitive to equate austerities adopted as ‘sustainable’ lifestyle choices with the imposition of austerity (for example in the form of welfare cuts) on people who may already be living in poverty.[[9]](#footnote-9) Jensen draws our attention to the ways in which practices and symbolic resources that can be articulated to environmental objectives have, in some cases, been transformed into resources that perpetuate inequalities, and in particular those of class. The risk that environmental principles could be elaborated in this way can be seen as an outcome of an environmental politics that is oriented towards an inward-facing, communitarian politics of resilience, localism and self-sufficiency. Too often, environmental practices become ways of closing down, rather than opening up, the possibilities for wider participation and benefit. In these contexts, post-material values may be constructed in exclusionary terms.

**Austerity for transition and degrowth**

In the course of this article I have discussed the rise of a historically-inflected austerity discourse in the UK with a view to identifying some of the lessons this case study provides for a project of remaking the concept of austerity and cognate phrases such as ‘living within our means’ and ‘less is more’. There are perhaps three key insights to be derived from this survey.

First, the turn to a concept of austerity in environmental and transition politics demonstrates the radical discursivity of austerity. Against the views of those that would argue that ‘austerity’ will always and necessarily be associated with puritanism, self-denial and displeasure, the rise of *desire* for austerity in this context provides evidence that the meanings linked to this signifier can in fact be radically reinvented. At the same time, this radical discursivity must be reckoned within a broader context of discursive struggle between different political agendas; there is a high risk that emergent discourses can be co-opted by divergent interests, particularly where they have begun to be successfully disseminated in popular media culture.

Second, any project of remaking the concept of austerity will require high levels of creativity when it comes to the task of identifying the symbolic resources that will facilitate such a project. These symbolic resources need to deliver opportunities for modeling pro-environmental economies and practices, and for the construction of analogy and precedence. While the past is not the *only* symbolic resource that is available for such a task, my case study demonstrates that it is a particularly valuable and potent resource. When it is approached with a degree of instrumentality, history can deliver many of these opportunities.

Third, and above all, a socially reconstructed concept of austerity for transition and degrowth must be both meaningful and appealing to the broadest possible constituencies. This will involve perpetuating a vision of austerity that promotes equality and social justice, rather than one that facilitates class distinction. A vision that accommodates a leftist defence of the living standards of the economically vulnerable is required, rather than one that instigates such a critique. The broader critical insight to be gleaned here is that any project of giving new meaning to the signifier ‘austerity’ must at the same time recognize and engage with the broader task of forging connections between labour and environmental politics in order to meet the challenges of the present conjuncture. In emphasizing the need for such articulations to occur, Andrew Ross describes a ‘potential alliance’ between red and green politics as ‘one of the great unfulfilled legacies from the twentieth century’ (Ross, 2009: 129). In the wake of the global financial crisis and the implementation of economic austerity policies, the task of articulating ‘green’ austerity to ‘red’ anti-cuts protest has become all the more pressing (Compass, 2011; see also Bailey, 2015).

This is a significant challenge, and I want to end by drawing attention to two possible ways forward. On the challenge of promoting post-material values, I find Ruth Levitas’s utopian reading of austerity culture and its constraints extremely valuable. Levitas recognizes that the endorsement of post-material, anti-consumerist values risks ‘diverting attention from distributive questions’ (2012: 338). She argues nonetheless that the ‘appeal of austerity’ lies in the fact that it carries ‘the desire for an alternative society’ (2012: 339), and recommends that we try to read austerity through a ‘hermeneutics of faith’ rather than one of suspicion. The purpose of such a reading would, she argues, be to ‘create a narrative’ in which the promotion of ideas about reduced consumption and self-organization ‘cease to be an ideological cover for neo-liberal dispossession of the poor, and become positive attributes embodied in another potential society’ (Levitas, 2012: 336).

Informed by this perspective, the task of reconstructing the concept of austerity is one that demands close attention to ways in which post-material values and environmental objectives can be linked to questions of social justice (Levitas, 2012: 338). In relation to the case study I have been discussing, this task might involve paying close attention to the practices of austerity – of digging, making and ‘doing’ – that are so highly valued in austerity culture, and to the contexts in which these practices can be articulated to a politics of transition or degrowth that prioritizes equality and distributive justice. It might involve exploring how and where desire for austerity is articulated not only to care for the environment, but to institutions of the public sector, to care for others, and to alternative conceptions of the future.

Alongside Levitas’s utopian hermeneutics, I also want to draw attention to the opportunities that reimagining austerity outside of a paradigm of scarcity might present. Reflecting on the interpenetration of rhetorics of economy and ecology in an earlier moment of recession, Andrew Ross has argued that a certain environmentalist perspective that regards the ‘principle of scarcity’ as ‘a rudimentary circumstance of nature’ is guilty of projecting ‘particular social prejudices […] into ideas about the natural world. Nature only appears to be “limited” or “scarce” if it is conceived as a finite quantity of economic resources that can be renewed or exhausted’ (1994: 261). The story of eco-austerity’s co-option to neoliberal interests in the UK context can be attributed, on this account, to an acceptance of scarcity ‘as a default condition’, and by the adoption of a framework ‘strikingly similar to that used to describe the global debt economy’ (1994: 14). In a post-scarcity future, Ross argues, ‘scarcity no longer exists conceptually as a default condition, and an ecological society has developed a more democratic way of ordering its priorities’ (1994: 271; see also D’Alisa et al., 2014). A further challenge might then be to imagine the conceptual function of ‘austerity’ not just for transition or degrowth but in a post-scarcity future.

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1. Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizens’ Action. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion of this pairing see Bramall, Gilbert and Meadway (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Schumacher Circle is a group of organizations inspired by the work of E. F. Schumacher. See: http://www.schumacher.org.uk/schumacher-circle/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The term ‘home front’ refers to the civilian contribution to the war effort. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a discussion of the recasting of similar traditional and domestic practices in the context of Poland, see Podkalicka and Potkańska (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the UK, allotments are small plots of land that are rented for a small fee, and used primarily for growing vegetables. Usually located a short distance from the allotment holder’s residence, they exist in both rural and urban settings. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See for example Imperial War Museum London (2008); Isaac, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Extending this argument, it might also be argued that austerity nostalgia’s ‘vogueish signifiers’, which have been interpreted as ‘almost comically white’ (Harris, 2009), also serve as a site for the production of *raced* ‘others’ (see Pitcher, 2014: 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a resource database of research on the impact of spending cuts on low income families and deprived communities in the UK, see http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/centres/chrp/projects/spendingcuts/resources/database/reportsgroups [↑](#footnote-ref-9)