

Urban sociologists will get the most mileage out of those chapters (e.g. the ones by Lévesque, Mitchell and Brighenti) that link investigations of the interstice with issues and debates in our field, however virtually all chapters can be enjoyed by scholars with an interest in urban theory and space and place. While the book's high price will likely prevent it from becoming a classroom staple, many individual chapters are suitable for use in advanced urban courses and certain to energize discussions. In closing, *Urban Interstices* is a highly original collection that cuts a fresh path into the woods of urban theory and research, and we shall look forward to what Brighenti will be cooking up next.

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**Dexter Whitfield 2014: *Unmasking Austerity: Opposition and Alternatives in Europe and North America*. Nottingham: Spokesman Books**

For its proponents and critics alike, austerity has become the new buzzword to describe the neoliberal crisis management drafted and implemented (despite strong and widespread resistance) in the aftermath of the 2009 recession. Politicians and decision-makers from many countries in Europe and North America have deployed austerity measures to rapidly reduce public debt, which had increased enormously as a consequence of the global financial crisis and the ensuing huge state-funded banking rescue packages. As such, the vague and cynical promise of austerity comprises a combination of cutting public spending, reducing wages, privatizing public services and further dismantling the welfare state as a strategy to in turn allow the private sector to rekindle growth and thereby escape the economic recession. In response, critical scholars emphasize the negative consequences and economic failures of the recent turn towards extreme austerity measures, and analyse the social power relations sustaining it. By building on this literature and a broad range of other empirical (mostly statistical) data, Dexter Whitfield's short eBook gets to the heart of the latest developments; it gives a clear well-written condensed overview of both austerity policies and austerity protests in Europe and North America since 2008. The monograph is divided into four chapters which: (1) expose how austerity can drive economies further into recession; (2) identify key lessons from organizing and action against such policies; (3) formulate comprehensive alternative economic strategies informed by Keynesian thinking; and (4) look at the contradictions evident in neoliberal crisis management.

By examining austerity strategies, including their economic and social effects, Whitfield demonstrates in the first chapter how austerity policies and the neoliberal reconfiguring of the welfare state 'have fuelled the fire of recession in Europe and the US rather than stimulating growth' (p. 6). Despite its promises, austerity has failed as government debt has continued to increase and weak economic performance has prevailed in most countries, due to reduced effective demand created by significant reductions in public expenditure. This section concludes that the (flawed) theory of growth-friendly fiscal consolidation has been empirically discredited on a massive scale. Given this, the economic and social effects of austerity are catastrophic. By giving an impressive, but understandably incomplete, overview of the devastating social consequences of increasing unemployment, reduced wealth, widened social inequality and deep cuts to wages, benefits and pensions, the author convincingly demonstrates that austerity entails a 'gigantic wealth transfer from taxpayers to the corporate sector and wealthy individuals' (p. 7). Based on engagement with the multifaceted experiences of trade unions, civil society organizations and social movements, the second chapter identifies key lessons drawn from diverse actions and strategies that have been deployed against austerity policies in recent years. Whitfield's critique explains that most protests were directed only against government and *troika*-imposed public

spending cuts, too often ignoring the deeper roots of the financial crisis caused by banks and market failure. Though campaigns against deep cuts had an important role in challenging the composition and distribution of austerity policies, they did not significantly change them. According to the author, one reason for this failure could be that most anti-cuts campaigns were essentially defensive, and have ultimately become predictable and repetitive. In most cases, neither labour nor social movements could deliver comprehensive alternatives to neoliberal policies that were able to inspire more trenchant resistance. What such an alternative economic policy could look like is developed in the third chapter. Rooted in Keynesian thinking, Whitfield calls for a wide range of fundamental socio-economic reforms, including economic stimulus strategies, the reconstruction of public services and the welfare state, a radical reorganization of financial markets, the elimination of corporate welfare, an increase in the workforce's share of national income and an end to privatization deals in favour of a return of assets to public ownership. For him, alternative economic strategies should 'focus on reducing inequalities by extending and improving universal health, social care, education, child-care, social security, and access to good quality affordable housing' (p. 58). In the final chapter, the author briefly exposes rising social inequality as a key underlying cause of the financial crisis and examines the contradictions within austerity crisis management. This includes, for instance, the phenomena of neoliberal labour-market reforms potentially (if unintentionally) leading to higher social spending (for those made redundant by these very reforms), or cuts in unemployment benefits reducing the 'effectiveness of the welfare state's role as an "automatic stabiliser" to maintain aggregate demand' (p. 89) during the next crisis of capitalism. The book concludes with a 'radical rethink of trade union, community and social movement objectives, values and action strategies' (p. 93), a passionate call for stronger alliances between unions, civil society organizations and protest movements in order to achieve broad progressive social change based on a far-reaching reconstruction of the welfare state and public services.

The central strengths of *Unmasking Austerity* lie in its detailed but compact overview of both the numerous austerity policies and resulting social protests that have erupted across Europe and North America since the beginning of the global financial crisis, as well as in its offer of a concrete political alternative to further neoliberal restructuring. For these reasons, Whitfield has published a significant book worth recommending, not only to academics and urban scholars, but also to a much broader audience of social movement activists, trade unionists and indeed all people engaged in unmasking the claim that there is no alternative to austerity. However, what is perhaps lacking is a deeper (theoretical) engagement with the structural constraints, (transnational) social forces and other highly relevant obstacles that are currently successfully blocking most pathways towards progressive change. In addition, the alternatives proposed in the third chapter do not take into account the internal contradictions of capitalist accumulation itself, and are—as is the case with their neoliberal counterparts—still focused on the concept of growth, which ought to be achieved by other means of Keynesian demand management. In addition, Whitfield's alternative economic reform agenda looks (at least in part) much like a nostalgic invocation of the Fordist welfare state. To avoid such an impression, it may have been worthwhile to raise questions as to how his agenda might include not only an alternative to neoliberalism, but also more radical transformative demands with the potential to lead beyond capitalism. For example, the discussion on the relevance of participative democratic forms of decision-making in social movement organizing could have been pushed further by elaborating how the economy, the welfare state and public services might be organized in a similar way, and how the decommodification of social relations could be coupled with a deepening of democratic processes.