# Austerity: An environmentally dangerous idea

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## Abstract

The article examines austerity as a policy and practice that is dangerous not only for human societies and economies, but also for more-than-human ecologies and lives. Often presented as an economic tool that can 'fix' an economic crisis, austerity nevertheless carries serious environmental consequences which are not systematically documented or theorized. Here, we sketch a political ecology agenda for understanding austerity as environmental politics, focusing on three facets. First, austerity as justification for intensifying environmental destruction in the name of economic recovery. Second, austerity as a catalyst for increasing socio-environmental inequality, exacerbating colonial extractivism, and complexifying North/South binaries. Third, austerity as a socio-environmental condition that can kindle innovative environmental protection movements; but can also exacerbate climate denialism and new forms of 'othering.' The framework we offer here is pertinent at the aftermath of consecutive economic, pandemic, and inflation-induced austerity periods, when aggressive pro-growth agendas fast become normalized as prime recovery strategies.

**Keywords**: economic crisis, pandemic, austerity as class politics, North/South binary, post-growth, degrowth

## Résumé

L'austérité est une politique et une pratique dangereuses non seulement pour les sociétés et les économies humaines, mais aussi pour les écologies et les vies plus qu'humaines. Souvent présentée comme un outil économique capable de "résoudre" une crise économique, l'austérité a néanmoins de graves conséquences environnementales qui ne sont pas systématiquement documentées ou théorisées. Nous esquissons un programme d'écologie politique pour comprendre l'austérité en tant que politique environnementale, en nous concentrant sur trois aspects. Premièrement, l'austérité comme justification de l'intensification de la destruction de l'environnement au nom de la reprise économique. Deuxièmement, l'austérité en tant que catalyseur de l'accroissement des inégalités socio-environnementales, de l'exacerbation de l'extractivisme colonial et de la complexification des binaires Nord/Sud. Troisièmement, l'austérité est une condition socio-environnementale qui peut donner un coup de fouet à des mouvements novateurs de protection de l'environnement, tout en exacerbant le déni du changement climatique et de nouvelles formes d'"aliénation". Le cadre que nous proposons est pertinent au lendemain de périodes consécutives d'austérité économique, de pandémie et

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[1] Prof. Maria Kaika, Email: M.Kaika@uva.nl. Many thanks to the editors and the anonymous referees for their constructive comments and suggestions. The title of this article pays homage to (and draws inspiration from) Mark Blyth's brilliant monograph, which analyses austerity as a dangerous idea for both society and the economy (Blyth, M. [2013]. *Austerity: the history of a dangerous idea*. Oxford University Press). Parts of the research for this article were supported by the following grants: the EU-Next Generation EU and Ministerio de Universidades de España [Grant Maria Zambrano 2022]; the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) [project 2021.03735.CEECIND/CP1698/CT0002].

d'inflation, lorsque des programmes agressifs en faveur de la croissance se normalisent rapidement en tant que stratégies de redressement de premier plan.
**Mots-clés:** crise économique, pandémie, austérité en tant que politique de classe, binaire Nord/Sud, post-croissance, décroissance

## Resumen

El artículo examina la austeridad como política y práctica peligrosa no sólo para las sociedades y economías humanas, sino también para las ecologías y vidas más allá de lo humano. A menudo presentada como una herramienta económica que puede "arreglar" una crisis económica, la austeridad conlleva, sin embargo, graves consecuencias medioambientales que no están sistemáticamente documentadas ni teorizadas. Aquí esbozamos una agenda de ecología política para entender la austeridad como política medioambiental, centrándonos en tres facetas. En primer lugar, la austeridad como justificación para intensificar la destrucción medioambiental en nombre de la recuperación económica. En segundo lugar, la austeridad como catalizador para aumentar la desigualdad socioambiental, exacerbar el extractivismo colonial y complejizar los binarios Norte/Sur. En tercer lugar, la austeridad como condición socioambiental que puede generar movimientos innovadores de protección medioambiental, pero que también puede exacerbar el negacionismo climático y nuevas formas de "otredad". El marco que ofrecemos aquí es pertinente tras los consecutivos periodos de austeridad económica, pandémica e inflacionista, en los que las agresivas agendas a favor del crecimiento se han normalizado rápidamente como estrategias de recuperación de primer orden.
**Palabras clave**: crisis económica, pandemia, austeridad como política de clases, binario Norte/Sur, poscrecimiento, decrecimiento

**Περίληψη**

Το άρθρο εξετάζει τη λιτότητα ως μια πρακτική που είναι επικίνδυνη όχι μόνο για τις ανθρώπινες κοινωνίες και οικονομίες, αλλά και για το φυσικό περιβάλλον καθώς κατανοείται ως ένα μείγμα πολιτικής με σημαντικές περιβαλλοντικές συνέπειες, οι οποίες δεν έχουν καταγραφεί ή θεωρητικοποιηθεί συστηματικά. Παρουσιάζουμε την *πολιτική οικολογία της λιτότητας* ως εργαλείο ανάλυσης των περιβαλλοντικών πτυχών της λιτότητας εστιάζοντας σε τρεις άξονες. Πρώτον, η λιτότητα ως διαδικασία εντατικοποίησης της περιβαλλοντικής καταστροφής στο όνομα της οικονομικής ανάκαμψης. Δεύτερον, η λιτότητα ως καταλύτης για την αύξηση των κοινωνικοπεριβαλλοντικών ανισοτήτων, την έξαρση του αποικιοκρατικού εξορυκτισμού και τη διαιώνιση των άνισων σχέσεων μεταξύ παγκόσμιου Βορρά και Νότου. Τρίτον, η λιτότητα ως κοινωνικο-περιβαλλοντική συνθήκη που μπορεί να πυροδοτήσει κοινωνικο-περιβαλλοντικά κινήματα αλλά και τάσεις άρνησης της κλιματικής αλλαγής ή άλλες μορφές αλλοτρίωσης. Το πλαίσιο που προτείνουμε δεν αφορά μόνο περιόδους λιτότητας αλλά συνολικότερα περιόδους κατά τις οποίες οι επιθετικές ατζέντες υπερ της ανάπτυξης κανονικοποιούνται ως πρωταρχικές στρατηγικές ανάκαμψης.
**Λέξεις κλειδιά**: λιτότητα, οικονομική κρίση, πανδημία, Παγκόσμιος Βορράς-Νότος, αποανάπτυξη, μετα-ανάπτυξη

## 1. Introduction: the need to conceptualize austerity as environmental politics

The article draws attention to austerity as a set of ideas, practices, and policies that are dangerous not only for human societies and economies (Blyth, 2013), but also for the environment, and for more-than-human lives and ecologies. Within this context, we urge that there is a need to examine austerity as environmental politics, and we sketch a political ecology conceptual framework to analyse more systematically austerity's socio-environmental origins, dynamics, and effects.

Conceptualizing austerity as environmental politics involves a politics that redistributes not only assets, resources, and wealth, but also *by necessity* always redistributes socio-environmental relations. Conceptualizing austerity as environmental politics acknowledges that austerity *never* operates within a closed social-economic system; like any economic practice that redistributes wealth and resources it is *always* inseparable from the biophysical world and from local and global exchanges between socio-ecological systems, which are always power-laden and inherently political (Robbins, 2019; Heynen *et al.*, 2007; Peet *et al.*, 2010; Kaika *et al.*, 2022).

Aiming to set an agenda for a more systematic analysis of the socio-environmental origins and consequences of austerity, we draw attention to three key environmental dimensions of austerity that need to be documented and theorized in relation to each other.

- First, austerity as a drive for increasing environmental degradation. During and after austerity periods, aggressive pro-growth policies and intensified resources extraction are justified in the name of 'rescuing' the economy from stagnation.
- Second, austerity as a drive for: deepening socio-environmental inequalities along class, race, ethnic, and gender lines; exacerbating colonial extractivism; and complexifying North/South binaries. Austerity's consequences range from reduction of environmental and living standards for marginalized groups, 'green' gentrification practices, and predatory resource extraction, to the privatization of water, land, minerals, and other key natural resources.
- Third, austerity as a driver for reactionary environmental politics and a catalyst for exacerbating climate denialism or apathy, but also as an impetus for generating progressive environmental politics and alternative imaginaries for organizing socio-environmental relations, which can offer an antidote to dominant techno-managerial solutions to climate change (Swyngedouw 2010; Arampatzi, 2016; Kousis & Paschou, 2017; Malamidis, 2020; Drago, 2021; Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2021).

We argue that these three environmental dimensions of austerity need to be systematically documented and comparatively analysed across different historical and geographical contexts. This article does not offer an exhaustive account of all the environmental repercussions of austerity. Our aim is to set an agenda and open a debate that can promote a more systematic analysis of austerity as environmental politics. This debate is particularly pertinent today, as aggressive, and environmentally damaging (green or un-green) pro-growth policies fast become favoured strategies for recovering from a sequence of recession (2008), pandemic (2019), and inflation (2022) induced austerity periods (Russel & Benson, 2014). Many of the environmental consequences of these austerity periods will persist for many decades to come.

## 2. Austerity as class politics: a socially dangerous idea

The most widely used and operationalized definition of austerity is the narrow, economistic characterisation that depicts it as a set of economic policies and measures for budgetary and fiscal discipline, imposed during crisis periods in order to reduce public deficits and attract new waves of investment (Blyth, 2013; Baines & Cunningham, 2021). Austerity measures involve cuts in domestic wages, social spending, and welfare provision, while austerity's more recent, 'neoliberal' variant (Peck & Theodore, 2019) also involves the privatization of key public services, sectors, and infrastructures such as healthcare, education, water, energy, railroads, etc. (Geagea *et al.*, 2023; Luke & Kaika, 2019). This narrow economic definition and understanding of austerity is aligned with an equally narrow understanding of the capitalist economy as a system of production and consumption that follows rational economic rules; and when it falls into crisis it has equally rational technocratic solutions that operate independently from social and political processes (Nightingale *et al.*, 2020). It is this narrow, technocratic, and pseudo-rational depiction of austerity as a tool to solve capitalist crises that convinced policymakers throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to implement extensive austerity programmes across the global North and the global South, in the name of 'correcting' economic crises, slashing public debt, and boosting investment.

But austerity programs have repeatedly failed to deliver the expected positive economic outcomes; nay, they repeatedly had detrimental economic consequences (Blyth, 2013). The austerity programs imposed after the Great Depression, those imposed by the IMF after the oil crisis of 1973, and those imposed during the golden era of neoliberal globalization (the 1980s and 1990s), all drove cash poor, resource rich countries into a carousel of increased debt and structural adjustments that undermined their sovereignty (Crisp & Kelly, 2002). After the 2008 crisis, the austerity programs imposed on many advanced economies of the global North (the 'Souths' within the North), notably Eastern and Southern European countries had equally disastrous effects. Ten

years onwards, the IMF reported an *increase* in the median general government debt-GDP ratio from 36 to 51 percent, and an *increase* in central bank balance sheets "several multiples the size they were before the crisis" (Chen *et al.*, 2019, p. 5; Tamale, 2021; see also IMF, 2012).

But austerity's negative consequences are not just economic; its social consequences are more serious and far-reaching. The austerity imposed after the Great Depression by ill-advised policymakers in western economies led to significant increase in poverty, exclusion, social upheaval, extreme nationalism, and politics of hatred; all of which, in turn, contributed significantly to the Second World War (Blyth, 2013; Krugman, 2011; Kotz, 2015; Keynes, 1931, 1933). Equally, the austerity programs of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s in the global South had a severe impact on poverty and inequality. The austerity imposed after the 2008 economic crisis directly contributed to an unprecedented rise in poverty levels, a sharp deterioration of public mental and physical health (Stuckler & Basu, 2013), and a geometric increase in suicide rates. Equally detrimental were the social consequences of the austerity induced during the covid pandemic. Oxfam (2022b) reported that 263 million people went into extreme poverty in 2022 alone because of pandemic-related austerity, as 50 percent of the world's countries slashed their share of spending on social protection; 70 percent cut their education spending; and half of the world's low and lower middle-income countries even cut their share of spending on healthcare in the midst of the worst global health crisis in a century. All in the name of boosting market confidence and economic recovery (Walker *et al.*, 2022).

Yet not everybody is affected negatively by austerity. People with high incomes and wealth invariably see their real income rise and the value of their assets grow under austerity regimes (Blyth, 2013). The pandemic-induced austerity in 2020 and 2021 is, again, a case in point: whilst governments slashed social and welfare spending with one hand, with the other they fed (via central banks) trillions of dollars into financial markets in order to 'encourage' new investment cycles. In addition, 95 percent of all countries froze or even lowered high income taxes during the pandemic (Walker *et al.*, 2022).[2] As a result, the pandemic-induced austerity period generated one new billionaire every 30 hours; and plunged one million people into extreme poverty every 33 hours[3] (Oxfam 2022a, 2022b; Jha, 2022). The net result was a global explosion of inequality levels.

Austerity's hand in severely increasing global inequality was at the heart of Harvey's (2011) call to redefine austerity as a class project engineered by capital in an effort to protect profits and boost accumulation, while weakening the power of labor and disciplining social movements (see also Baines & Cunningham, 2021). Blyth (2013) significantly expanded this analysis by depicting austerity as a socially dangerous redistributive mechanism that increases inequality; a 'class' politics that pits the poor against the rich; "a class specific put-option … exercisable by the top 30 percent on the bottom 70 percent of the income distribution" (Blyth's 2013, p. 259; see also Chen *et al.*, 2019; IMF, 2012).

However, the expansion of the strictly economistic/econometric framework within which austerity is examined still overlooks a very significant factor. Important as it is, the analysis of austerity as class politics fails to acknowledge that the economic practices of austerity and their consequences do *not* operate within a closed social-economic system; they are inseparable from the biophysical world. Any shift in economic policy that redistributes assets, resources, and wealth, is predicated upon the redistribution of socio-environmental relations (Peet *et al.*, 2010). This is something that political ecology scholarship has been arguing and documenting for decades.

*Austerity as environmental politics: A political ecology approach*

The conceptualization of austerity as environmental politics that we advocate here acknowledges that the economic practices of austerity are always inseparable from the biophysical world and from local and global socio-ecological exchange systems (Robbins, 2019; Heynen *et al.*, 2007; Peet *et al.*, 2010; Kaika *et al.*, 2022).

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[2] At the same time, 143 of 161 countries froze the tax rates on their richest citizens, and 11 countries even lowered them. France eliminated its wealth tax altogether in 2019 (Walker *et al.*, 2022)

[3] Oxfam's (2022a) calculation was that 573 new billionaires were created during the pandemic; see also https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/monetary-policy-hub/

Austerity does not only pit the poor against the rich; it also systematically pits environmental protection against economic growth; or, at the very least, austerity becomes a catalyst for politicizing both environmental protection and economic growth policies.[4] If we accept that austerity is a tool for socio-economic engineering that boosts profits by impoverishing populations, then the link between re-engineering society and the economy, and re-engineering the environment during austerity periods needs to be documented and theorized. This link between socio-environmental cycles and economic cycles has been the key focus of political ecology scholarship for many decades.

Political ecology focuses on the evolving relationship between the biophysical sphere and capitalist economies and offers significant insight on how the environmental crisis and the economic crisis are co-constituted. But thus far, with few notable exceptions, political ecology scholarship has overlooked the importance of the environmental impact of austerity. Here, we follow Forsyth's (2003) critical understanding of political ecology to develop an understanding of austerity that shows how it is relevant to the biophysical world and to more-than-human livelihoods. To do this, we open a dialogue between a political economy analysis of austerity as a class project, and a political ecology analysis of the relation between cycles of socio-economic crisis and the environment. Within this framework, we seek to examine the roots, causes, and consequences of austerity programs in relation to unequal socio-ecological exchanges.

We build on political ecology's theorization and analysis of how expansionary compounding growth is likely to aggravate both future environmental crises and future crises of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2014). The 'environmental fix' concept is particularly pertinent to understanding how the crisis dynamics of capitalism are crucial for driving and intensifying extractivism, environmental depletion, and socio-environmental inequality under austerity (Ekers & Prudham, 2018; Arboleda, 2020; Peet *et al.*, 2010; Irving, 2021). The 'environmental fix' explains how an economic crisis can be temporarily deferred, by transforming environmental problems into economic opportunities (Bakker, 2009, 2015; Castree, 2008). Examples include: the creation of $CO_2$ trading markets, 'green' deals and green investment mechanisms in general, circular economies, bioengineering, and the marketization and financialization of natural resources and nature conservation (national parks and reserves). Monetization and financialization are also mechanisms (Bakker, 2009; 2015; Castree, 2008). An environmental fix safeguards the expansion of capitalist accumulation by reconfiguring society-nature relations and tweaking the conditions under which nature is (re)produced (Ekers & Prudham, 2015, 2017, 2018). Although Castree and Christophers (2015) argued that some "fixes" may lead to a 'greener' and more socially just capitalism, political ecology scholarship has offered unquestionable evidence that most 'environmental fixes' end up increasing social inequality and environmental injustice (Heynen & Robbins, 2005; Heynen *et al.*, 2007; McCarthy, 2015; Anguelovski, 2019). The neoliberal response to global capitalist crises significantly intensified "environmental fixes" through marketizing environmental problems, deregulating and privatizing larger domains of the environment, and geographically dislocating pollution and toxicity (Castree, 2008).

However, for all its explanatory power, the 'environmental fix' concept is not adequate to fully elucidate the dynamics of austerity as environmental politics. Austerity is itself a set of economic policies that are supposed to provide a 'fix' to a capitalist crisis. But the fact that austerity is always presented as an economic program of 'fiscal discipline', obfuscates the shifts in the biophysical world that this discipline requires. The obfuscation of the environmental implications of austerity becomes even stronger because austerity programs are often mistaken in the popular imaginary or even publicly presented as slow-growth or no-growth policies. Austerity programs therefore are even erroneously considered to be beneficial for environmental protection or conservation. This serious confusion was present for example in the recent pandemic-induced austerity period when the temporary reduction in $CO_2$ emissions was celebrated as austerity's positive side effect; before aggressive growth strategies then kicked in.

The false perception of austerity as potentially positive for the environment obscures further the fact that austerity programs imposed during economic slumps are invariably aggressive pro-growth strategies, which carry significant negative implications for the environment and for socio-environmental relations (see Bramall,

[4] Many thanks to the anonymous referee for the suggestion to rephrase our claim in this sentence.

2013, 2017). Austerity imposed as an antidote to an economic slump is never a conservation practice; it is a pro-growth tool. As John Maynard Keynes (1931, 1933) advocated, the best time to implement targeted austerity measures that can be socially (and environmentally, we add) beneficial is *outside* economic slump periods. Environmental protection programs need (public) investment, and therefore are best implemented during periods of economic boom (see also Krugman, 2009, 2011; Blyth, 2013). Although conservation programs are indeed implemented during austerity periods, these – as we shall see in the next sections – invariably work in favour of extractivism and capital accumulation, as budget cuts in environmental protection and personnel become the justification for the commodification of nature for market expansion purposes.

Our call for a systematic analysis of austerity programs as environmental politics is a call to *document*, *historicize* and *geographically embed* the sequence of events that lead from economic crisis to austerity, and from austerity to pro-growth policies that boost capital accumulation through increased extractivism, environmental degradation, and accentuated exploitation and marginalisation. Following Forsyth and Walker's (2008, p. 4) call for a more nuanced understanding of environmental change, we argue that we also need a more "biophysically nuanced and politically representative understanding" of austerity. In the following sections, we sketch a framework that can help us build this understanding focusing on three key environmental dimensions of austerity.

## 3. Austerity as an environmentally dangerous idea: three matters of concern

*Adding environmental destruction to socio-economic destruction*

In recent years, political ecology scholars started to empirically document the relation between austerity periods and the aggravation of socio-environmental conditions, and of the impact of "natural" disasters, from flooding and fires to toxic waste contamination, spread of disease, and lack of access to safe drinking water.

Holman (2022), for example, shows how austerity measures exacerbated aggressive fossil fuelled growth, climate change denial, and colonialism in Australia; and how in turn, these policy changes accentuated the bushfires disasters during the 'Black Summer' of 2009, and were central in the country's unpreparedness to face them. Lloréns and Stanchich (2019) document how the catastrophic conditions after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, homeland to the second largest US Latinx group, are linked to a long history of federally imposed austerity, combined with colonial exploitation. Safranski (2014) demonstrates how in bankrupt Detroit, austerity measures were articulated with renewed settler-colonial imaginaries of the area as a new 'postindustrial' urban frontier ready for re-conquering; these discourses prepared the local population for new waves of aggressive growth and real estate speculation.

Hadjimichalis (2014) also offers an analysis of how prolonged austerity became the key justification for land grabbing in post-2008 Greece. Aggressive austerity-driven pro-growth policies are also reported as justifications for "green" gentrification practices in Spain (Anguelovski *et al*., 2019), and for the relaxation of environmental risk management across the US and the European South (Peck, 2012; Ginn & Ascensão, 2018; Leidereiter, 2019). Austerity in Greece, Spain and Portugal have also been linked to increased pressures for intensified extractivism (Velegrakis *et al.*, 2022; Calvário & Kallis, 2017; Calvário *et al.*, 2017, 2020, 2022; Lekakis & Kousis, 2013), water privatization (Kaika, 2012, 2017a,b), and predatory rent-seeking practices (Garcia Lamarca & Kaika 2017).

In relation to conservation politics, Apostolopoulou and Adams (2015) examine how the post-2008 austerity periods led to severe cuts in nature conservation budgets in the UK and in Greece. This left only two choices for "protected natures": to either leave them to degradation whilst focusing on growth practices; or to let the markets 'save' them by introducing "neoliberal conservation" practices, e.g. by turning conservation areas into commodities for market expansion through 'green' growth mechanisms (Botetzagias *et al.*, 2018). The tourist and real estate industries become key in the adoption of market-based instruments for increasing the marketization and privatization of protected natures during austerity, thus making the protection of the environment subservient to extractivism and capital accumulation practices (Apostopoulou *et al.*, 2021).

The scholars mentioned above have sown the seeds for researching the environmental destruction that austerity brings. But thus far, there is no systematic theorization of these processes, and no international

comparative research framework. We still need to systematically document and theorize exactly how and why the cuts in wages, social spending, and welfare during austerity periods create fertile ground for the public acceptance and normalization of aggressive growth, intensified extractivism, privatization of natural resources, and relaxation of regulation for polluting industries. A more systematic examination of the environmental destruction of austerity should also document and *historicize* how the long-lasting socio-environmental consequences of past austerity periods create the canvas on which further environmental destruction is drawn during and after new austerity periods. Finally, we need to systematically map the significant shifts in power relations and changed alliances between local and international actors and institutions that austerity brings in relation to environmental protection. These changes, imposed in the name of austerity, are almost never reversed afterwards (Čavoški, 2015).

*Deepening socio-environmental inequality and complexifying the North/South divide*

The dynamics that legitimize environmental destruction during and after austerity periods are inseparable from the dynamics that increase the risk of exposure of vulnerable humans and animals to toxic substances, pollution, flooding, and fires and that reduce the protection of vulnerable populations from environmental damage and disaster. If we take seriously the recognition of austerity as a set of policies that intensifies economic inequality, we should also recognize, document, and theorise how and why austerity also intensifies socio-environmental inequalities across different segments of the society and different geographical regions. Austerity measures imposed in Canada exacerbated settler-colonial power relations in British Columbia's indigenous territories as they justified the financialization of forest land (Ekers, 2019). In Ave, Northern Portugal, the post-2008 austerity-driven cuts in flood protection, combined with the place's long history of uneven distribution of risk protection infrastructures, created the conditions for working class communities to suffer disproportionately during the 2016 floods disaster (Leidereiter, 2019). The socio-environmental impact of the 2019 pandemic-related austerity was unequally distributed across class, ethnic, and gender lines as cuts in health budgets made marginalized groups even more likely to die from COVID-19 and even more vulnerable to the environmental hazards related to post-pandemic policies when environmental protection was presented as a luxury, and any alternative –other than aggressive growth– as a risky strategy (Abedi *et al.*, 2021; Reichelt *et al.*, 2021; Rose-Redwood *et al.*, 2020; Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2022). In West African cities austerity programmes were central for exacerbating the population's vulnerability to outbreaks of the Ebola virus (Wallace *et al*., 2016). In Greece, the imposition of capital controls in 2015 left public hospitals unable to import chemotherapy drugs for cancer patients. The same capital controls left the Athens Zoo unable to import the special dietary supplements necessary to feed 2,200 animals (Karagiannopoulos, 2015). Magalhães (2017) also documents the detrimental impact on biodiversity from Brazil's 2016 austerity laws, which froze public spending on biodiversity protection for 20 years (along with funding for scientific research, education, and health care).

The increase in socio-environmental inequality that austerity brings often goes beyond the strict geographical territory in which austerity is implemented. Austerity measures intensify global unequal ecological exchanges, but they also complexify and even unsettle the traditional North/South divide. Many authors argue that the post-2008 austerity policies imposed on advanced economies of the global North created several 'norths' within the 'Global North' and several 'souths' within the 'Global South' (Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014; Acosta, 2013; Brand *et al.*, 2016; Gudynas, 2013; Lander, 2018; Svampa, 2015). As Kaika (2012) notes, the post-2008 austerity measures implemented in Europe borrowed their armory from well-established practices to which the global South had been subjected for many decades (see also Hadjimichalis, 2017; Burns *et al*., 2020). The ways in which austerity has driven intensified market-environmentalism in nature conservation in many global North contexts (e.g., UK, Germany) resembles the "debt-for-nature" politics imposed in Mexico to enforce neoliberal conservation (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2017) or to reconstitute development as a market good (Ervine, 2011). Similarly, the post-2008 appointment of EU 'commissioners' to govern the 'ungovernable' European South mirrored decades of demands for austerity and technocratic governance in the global South. Post-2008 demands for changes in the constitution of European countries (North and South) to prioritize debt servicing over servicing environmental and social protection needs, mimicked the way in which the global

South has always been –and still is– pressurized to prioritize debt repayments over servicing the environmental and welfare needs of local populations (Kaika, 2012).

As international comparative-contrasting scholarship becomes enriched with more case studies and more in-depth conceptual analysis, we also call for a more longitudinal analysis of how and why the impact of austerity on the poor, indigenous populations, migrants, racialized communities, women, LGBTQ+, and the working-classes across the world varies significantly between the twentieth and the twenty-first century.

*Anti- Austerity politics as environmental politics.*

The same austerity policies that lead to environmental degradation and inequality also create the breeding ground for new forms of politics. New social movements combine anti-austerity struggles with environmental justice struggles and often produce new imaginaries and more egalitarian ways to organize socio-environmental relations. For example, in the Andes, in Ecuador, anti-austerity politics led to more systematic anti-extractivism movements and new agro-ecological collectives, which were subsequently re-scaled during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vela-Almeida, 2018; Vela-Almeida & Venegas, 2020). In Canada, the ongoing Indigenous struggles against land enclosures originally started out as anti-austerity protests (Ekers, 2019). Equally, the now pan-European Right2Water movement and new water commoning practices emerged as a direct protest against austerity-justified water privatization programs (Kaika, 2017a, 2018; Bieler, 2018; Geagea *et al.*, 2023). The same is true for many more anti-extractivist movements, producer collectives, fair food distribution networks (Calvário *et al.*, 2017), and community gardening practices (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2021) that were originally borne out of the need to cope with dispossession from basic needs (food, water, land) but also out of the need to protect human and biophysical habitats from the aggressive developmental practices that accompany austerity periods (Pusceddu, 2020).

It is important to note that the socio-environmental movements that are borne during austerity periods in the global North and South are distinct in social composition and demands; their membership is not dominated by the middle-classes; and unlike many (Western) environmental movements, they make explicit the link between environmental struggle and class, gender and ethnicity struggle in ways that resonate the origins of the environmental movements of the 1970s. They call for focusing more closely and theorizing the connection between changes in material conditions of production/reproduction and environmental alertness. This is important for political ecology scholarship as it takes us beyond Martinez-Alier's (2002) suggestion that the main reason why the poor side with resources conservation in ecological conflicts is the failures of the economic valuation of environmental damages.

Moreover, it is not only grassroots social movements that contest the environmentally destructive outcomes of austerity. A wide range of social or solidarity-based economic practices emerged during austerity periods, promoting what Gibson-Graham termed "non-capitalocentric economic ethics" (Gibson-Graham & Roelvik, 2010; Hann & Hart, 2011; Narotzky, 2020): community based low-carbon initiatives (Aiken, 2017), commoning of key resources (Geagea *et al.*, 2023; Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2022), peer to peer co-production (Kostakis *et al.*, 2015), climate camps, and radical social enterprises (Larner, 2015); even SME entrepreneurs became unlikely allies in progressive movements during austerity (North, 2016). Many of these important and hard-fought actions are sustained in post-austerity times (Malamidis, 2020), although they remain small in scale and thus unable to produce significant change (Druijff & Kaika 2021).

However, the austerity-led destruction of the socio-environmental milieu of marginalized, subaltern, and working-class groups in the global South and the global North does not generate only progressive or solidary practices. The most recent neoliberal and colonial austerity has eroded many 'traditional' social practices: from welfare institutions and trade unions, to solidarity economies and Indigenous community networks (Bailey et al., 2021; della Porta & Mattoni, 2014; Featherstone, 2015; Lapavitsas, 2013). This destruction of socio-environmental solidarity *milieu* directly contributed to the rise of discourses, practices, and politics of climate change denialism, populist nationalism, colonialism, and other exclusionary views of global socio-environmental exchanges. It also exacerbated violence from above as well as 'from below' with respect to the biophysical world (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014; Featherstone, 2015; Kaika & Karaliotas, 2014; Lapavitsas, 2013; Kaika, 2017b). Kotsila and Kallis (2019), for example, scrutinize how cuts in healthcare and welfare

budgets in austerity-ridden Greece created the perfect conditions for malaria to become endemic. Whilst uninsured immigrants with no access to healthcare became the main victims of malaria, they also became the victims of racist attacks, as they were stigmatized by local populations as the ones who were spreading the disease. Equally, Pulido (2016, p. 8) documents how in Flint, Michigan, the local state operating under a strict austerity regime "chose to respond to an urban fiscal crisis by poisoning its people", the majority of whom were poor African Americans. Bigger and Millington (2020) also show how municipal programs for climate change adaptation in New York City and Cape Town deepened patterns of racialized austerity. Ginn and Ascensão (2018) document similar practices of hatred and 'othering' in post-2008 Lisbon, where marginalized citizens who started using urban green spaces to produce their food were stigmatized by policy makers who promoted 'cosmetic' greening interventions on these spaces, as part of a 'green' gentrification plan to revamp the city's real estate potential after the economic slump.

A more systematic examination of anti-austerity environmental movements that have the potential to disrupt pro-growth uneven policies should be matched by a more systematic documentation of the ways in which environmental concerns during austerity also drive regressive politics and new forms of social conflict across geographical locations and scales, intersecting with class, gender, and anti-colonial political struggles (M'Barek *et al.*, 2020; Tsavdaroglou *et al.*, 2017; Tsavdarogolu & Kaika, 2022; Velegrakis & Kosyfologou, 2019; Featherstone, 2015; Beveridge & Featherstone, 2021; Schlosberg, 2004).

## 4. Conclusion

In this article we have set out an agenda for researching austerity as environmental politics; a set of policies which are hazardous *not only* for the economy and society, but also for the environment. If we acknowledge austerity as a tool for socio-economic engineering that boosts profits by impoverishing populations, then the link between socio-economic and socio-environmental engineering during austerity needs to be documented and theorized. We identified three key facets of austerity as environmental politics which need to be conceptually examined in relation to each other, and empirically documented through international comparative-contrasting analysis.

First, the processes through which austerity intensifies environmental destruction. Second, the ways in which austerity intensifies socio-environmental inequality and complexifies North/South binaries. Third, the ways in which austerity can generate progressive environmental movements, but can also kindle regressive climate denialism, racism, xenophobia, and 'othering', as marginalized social groups are often blamed for the environmental degradation that austerity brings.

The research agenda we set out here can offer important intellectual and policy acumen when thinking about socio-economic recovery after a sequence of austerity periods induced by the 2008 economic crisis, the 2019 pandemic crisis, and the 2022 inflationary crisis. Although the origins and nature of these crises differ (Hansen, 2020), all three led to austerity periods which shared two key socio-environmental consequences in common: first, they all bumped concerns over climate change; and second, they all ended with the delegation of environmental concerns to ‘green' or 'smart' growth agendas that remain firmly rooted in the expansionary logic of capital accumulation, including the normalisation of the nuclear industry as a 'green' energy alternative.

As aggressive and unequal, post-pandemic 'green' and 'non-green' growth recovery recipes already appear on the horizon, examining previous austerity periods as environmental politics offers valuable knowledge useful for contesting new cycles of austerity-driven socio-environmental destruction (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2021). Documenting and theorizing austerity as environmental politics needs us to stop and reflect whether the decrease in the percentage rate of the real and nominal gross domestic product does constitute a crisis. In addition, it offers tools to address future economic crises from a different perspective; one where politicizing the environment takes precedent over capital interests.

Austerity generated a plethora of agonistic, non-consensual experimentations with new environmental politics, which go beyond the "protest" or "passivity of the neo-liberal citizen-consumer" (Barr & Pollard, 2016, p. 2). Struggles that evolve around demands for reparations, debt cancellation, re-communalization of resources and structural reforms in the economic world order, create space and political dynamics towards social-ecological transformations away from the growth imperative. As the Green Deal and techno-managerial

solutions dominate environmental politics at the end of the pandemic and the beginning of a new inflationary crisis, these important and hard-fought contestations can contribute towards moving beyond the technocratic neoliberal orthodoxies of climate change policies.

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