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'DEFEND THE TEN': EVERYDAY DISSENSUS AGAINST THE SLOW SPOILING OF LAMBETH'S LIBRARIES

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‘DEFEND THE TEN’: EVERYDAY DISSENSUS AGAINST THE SLOW SPOILING OF LAMBETH’S LIBRARIES

Abstract

In April 2016, two-hundred people in the London Borough of Lambeth occupied Carnegie Library, forcibly preventing its closure by a local council rolling-out deep austerity measures. The nine-day occupation was a high-point of 15-months of struggle to ‘Defend the Ten’ libraries in Lambeth against an austerity agenda the council sought to smoothly administer. Through an in-depth account of the struggle, this paper tells a story of the occupation foregrounding the protracted process and persistent interventions that led up to it. In doing so, it makes two contributions to critical geographical literatures on post-crisis austerity, responding to calls for rich, processual, and multi-scalar accounts of how austerity measures are downloaded and rolled-out, as well as experienced and resisted in everyday and undecided ways. First, going beyond an account of austerity as a fiscal policy imposed on cities from above, the paper makes visible the everyday spatial violence of austerity that is rolled-out, experienced, and resisted as a slow spoiling of social infrastructure. Secondly, it makes sense of the ambivalent (post)politics of austerity, developing an account of everyday dissensus to reveal mundane non-evental ruptures and the emergence of demands for real democracy in a context of closure shaped by forces of dispossession.

Key Words: Austerity, Everyday Dissensus, Social Infrastructure, Libraries

Introduction

On the 1st of April 2016, following a candle-lit vigil to mark its anticipated last day of public funding, two hundred people in the London Borough of Lambeth occupied Carnegie Library, temporarily preventing its closure by a local council rolling-out deep austerity measures. The nine-day occupation was the high-point of a protracted 15-month struggle to ‘Defend the Ten’ libraries in Lambeth against the council’s politico-administrative elite, their ostensibly cooperative consultation process, and the self-provisioning plans they sought to smoothly administer. Although the aims of those who occupied the library were not met – Carnegie Library has been redeveloped as a ‘healthy living centre’ – the occupation expanded the scope of an emerging movement, concentrated an affective outpouring of solidarity, and helped build political confidence and optimism. It was an affirmation that ‘in the midst of much destruction’ other worlds grow ‘like grass in the cracks of the urban pavement’ (Federici, 2019: 1).

Drawing on interviews with local campaigners, councillors and council officers, non-participant observation of campaign and council meetings, as well as written and audio-visual material circulated online¹, in this paper I develop an account of the collective struggle to Defend the Ten and seek to draw out the wider political significance of the occupation by foregrounding the protracted process

¹ The empirical material presented in this paper is drawn from a PhD thesis into the politics of austerity urbanism in London in which the London Borough of Lambeth was a case study. As part of this research 70 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local councillors, officers, community organisations, and residents/campaigners, 50 of which were with actors in Lambeth and 15 of which focused on Lambeth’s Libraries. Non-participant observation was conducted at 17 events, 14 of which were in Lambeth and 4 focused on Lambeth’s Libraries. Additionally, over 50 texts and other artefacts produced between 2010 and 2017 were analysed, 17 of which pertained to Lambeth’s Libraries. These included Lambeth Council policy documents, minutes of council meetings, local micro-media posts, and activist material such as blog posts, leaflets, open letters, and social media content including YouTube videos.

and 'persistent interventions' (Kern & McLean, 2017: 407) that led up to it. In doing so, I make two contributions to critical geographical literatures on post-crisis austerity, responding to calls for rich accounts of how austerity measures are downloaded, pulled-down, and rolled-out (Newman, 2013), as well as experienced, negotiated, and contested in everyday, messy, and undecided ways (Hitchen, 2019).

First, I go beyond an account of austerity as a set of fiscal measures imposed on cities from above and emphasise how local actors seek to procure consensus for and mobilise dissensus against a political economy of enforced scarcity on the ground. To do so, I take inspiration from an emerging literature that makes visible the everyday spatial violence of austerity (Shaw, 2019) in sites of social infrastructure and reproduction, such as public housing; pre-school, community, and leisure centres; parks and open spaces; and libraries (Hitchen, 2019; Raynor, 2016; Jupp, 2017; Robinson & Sheldon, 2019). Austerity is often depicted as a closure, a temporally bounded event in which the doors are locked and windows shuttered once and for all. Here, I dwell on a more ambiguous and undecided story (Kern & McClean, 2017) in which the time-space of budget cuts 'is ongoing with no clear end or resolution' (Hitchen, 2019: 20) in sight. The lived experience of austerity, I argue, is not just one of closure – quantified arrestingly by the 120,000 public spaces sold, 650 libraries shut, and 10,000 library workers made redundant by UK councils since 2010 – but of a slow *spoiling* of social infrastructure. With the concept of spoiling I hope to capture a particular kind of 'loss in the everyday' (Robinson & Sheldon, 2019: 111) felt individually and collectively in the diminished value, quality, and enjoyment of cherished social spaces that, whilst not yet definitively lost, have been gradually undone by top-down reconfigurations – reduced in size, handed over to volunteers or a social enterprise, and saddled with self-financing exigencies.

Secondly, through the case of Defend the Ten, I attempt to make sense of the ambivalent (post)politics of austerity (Enright & Rossi, 2017), which I argue is marked by the emergence of grassroots political demands for deeper democracy, beyond returns to a top-down welfare paternalism, in a context where the local state seeks to enforce fiscal scarcity and foreclose discussion about viable alternatives. Bringing into conversation the works of Jacques Rancière, Lauren Berlant, and Sara Ahmed I present an interpretation of the Defend the Ten struggle as 'everyday dissensus'. This entails first thinking austerity not as a post-political state of complete closure, but as an always undecided, frustrated, and unrealizable elite project; and secondly paying close attention to the everyday, embodied, and collective dynamics of the political process and non-evental rupture. In doing so, I emphasise how austerity is politicised not just through 'one-off spectacular events' (Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcàzar, 2019: 387), but also in 'persistent interventions' (Kern & McLean, 2017), embodied and collective 'snaps' (Ahmed, 2017), and mundane settings and contingent 'situations' (Berlant, 2011).

While in many respects an unspectacular and unsuccessful campaign, the story of Defend the Ten that I narrate and make sense of below is more than an ill-fated tale of people who fought heroically but futilely in the face of centrally imposed and inevitable budget cuts. This is not so simply a case where the post-political logic of TINA has struck again. Those involved in the Defend the Ten campaign came together to reject the local state's 'cooperative consultation', that sought to enrol residents in self-provisioned library futures, and instead insisted upon the enduring importance of social infrastructure as decommodified spaces of human encounter and coexistence (Shaw, 2019). In their everyday affirmation of publicness, equality, and resident-led democracy, Defend the Ten articulated and enacted political logics in excess of the local state's austerity realism and with 'the potential to point to, if not immediately realize, other kinds of urban worlds' (Kern & McLean, 2017: 407).

From Policing to Politicising Austerity through Everyday Dissensus

If cities are concentrated sites of contestation, the post-political city references the channelling and smothering of such constitutive energies. Proponents of this frame base their arguments on the ontological distinction post-foundational theorists make between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. In *Dis-agreement*, for example, Rancière (1999) distinguishes ‘the political’ from what is usually associated with politics: the actions of assemblies and judiciaries; the work of civil servants and local bureaucrats; and the machinations of policymaking. He suggests that none of these activities are political. Rather, they are part of a ‘police order’.

Operating as much at the level of perception as hard power, the police order denotes a set of partitions whereby a consensus about certain social ‘givens’ is realized through ‘the organisation of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimising this distribution’ (Rancière, 1999: 28). Notwithstanding variegation in technologies, modes, and regimes of governance police orders function as a society’s taken-for-granted distribution of issues in which certain concerns are articulated and understood as more or less public and open to fundamental disagreement, or as private, of the market, and best left to experts. For Rancière, this is achieved through the exercise of three principles of power: distribution (assigning parts and places); hierarchy (some govern, others are governed); and saturation (everyone has their part, every part is accounted for). In contrast, the political is reserved for *dissensual* actions and events that rupture the ‘police order’, throwing into question what is given and ‘the frame within which we see something as given’ (Rancière 2004: 304).

Building on this perspective Swyngedouw (2011) locates the contemporary post-political condition in new forms of urban governance-beyond-the-state, ‘which give a much greater role... to private economic actors on the one hand and to parts of civil society on the other in self-managing what until recently was provided or organised by the national or local state’ (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1992). With the post-political city, Swyngedouw goes against the celebratory grain of those lauding these technologies as empowering, democratic, and effective, and beyond critiques of the procedural ambiguities over how these opaque new state spaces (dis)invest actors of decisional power. Drawing on Rancière’s understanding of policing, he suggests that in the pursuit of consensus and joint public-private action a paradox cuts through contemporary urban governance and politics. Whilst the inclusionary and consensual thrust of ‘good governance’ is celebrated and rolled-out, in the face of roiling ecological, economic, political and indeed fiscal crises the parameters of acceptable and responsible debate are becoming increasingly circumscribed.

Seen through the post-political city lens, it is not in spite of but by way of consensus that this paradox persists. In consensus-seeking processes, all count and are accounted for, and any opinion and interest can be accommodated, so long as it does not fundamentally question the rules of the instituted game. To take part as a reasonable citizen is to accept the extant partition of the sensible, pursuing consensus to achieve ‘the optimal share that the objective givens of the situation allow’ (Rancière, 1999: 102). As such, ‘... dissensus becomes an ill, and those who insist there is an alternative, are relegated to the fringe of acceptable political discourse, if not beyond it’ (Mitchell et al. 2015: 2636).

Since Swyngedouw’s interventions, the post-political city frame has inspired a flurry of theoretical and empirical derivations within critical urban studies ranging from synoptic interpretations that trace the notion of a post-political ‘condition’ and ‘epoch’ across neoliberalising modes of governance, through to more fine-grained analyses that explain how politics is disavowed through ‘situated practices of

depoliticisation' (Darling, 2014: 74). Yet while the work of Rancière has risen to prominence, the analytical purchase of the 'post-political city' frame, and its distinction between politics-as-policing and the 'properly' political-as-dissensus, has not been without its critics. Leslie Kern and Heather McClean (2017: 406), for example, point to an intellectually and politically debilitating trend in much of the critical urban scholarship on neoliberalism and post-politics to reproducing 'abstract, detached, colonial, and masculinist modes of urban knowledge production' which seem blind to all but depoliticising closure and co-optation, on the one hand, and spectacular forms of insurrection and rage, on the other. Not only does such scholarship axiomatically confirm the actualization of a tendency whose hold may be in need of empirical verification but, as Peake (2016) warns, its heroic and event-oriented theory of political change risks effacing the everyday work of existing struggles and dismissing all actions whose outcomes fall short of the privileged revolutionary 'event', including a library occupation that fails to keep the library open, as always already destined to fail. Against this, Kern and McClean (2017: 410) invoke Clive Woods (2002) and call for 'a refusal to become (or remain)... 'academic coroners' using our 'rusty' tools for autopsies, rather than sharpening them for social change'.

In the empirical sections that follow, I work through these important critiques in two ways. First, notwithstanding the risks of falling into the 'post-political trap' (Beveridge & Koch, 2018), operationalisations of post-politics as a conceptual heuristic need not be taken as evidence that we are already in the grips of a dystopian, hermetically sealed, post-political present. Rather, working with Kern and McClean's (2017) insistence on undecidability it is possible to speak of the 'post-political city' as an incomplete and ultimately unrealisable process, whose logic of narrowing the imagination and scope of concrete struggles will always be challenged. Secondly, drawing on Lauren Berlant's (2011) understanding of the 'situation' and Sara Ahmed's notion of the 'snap', I suggest that it is possible to read Rancière's conceptualisation of the political in a relational, processual, and everyday way *without* fetishizing 'radical rupture over the mundane persistence of those on the margins' (Derickson, 2017: 44).

For Rancière, politics as dissensus is always understood in *relation* to the police order: 'politics acts on the police' (Rancière, 1999: 33) and is the 'rendering visible of the partiality of the order of the police' (Derickson, 2017: 45). Politics occurs when the police order's common sense is disrupted, exceeded, and reorganised; when a constitutive outside – a 'part of those that have no part' – refuse the hierarchical logic of the police order and claim their part as equals. This, for Rancière, is the inaugural *process* of disidentification and identification which occurs when those with no part refuse their non-part (disidentification) and demand a part in society by asserting and verifying their axiomatic equality; their capacity to speak, reason, and produce knowledge, as well as their right to decisional power (identification).

Significantly, there is nothing inherent in Rancière's concept of dissensus to suggest a privileging of one-off ruptural events over slower persistent interventions that seek to rework social relations. Whilst insurgent movements maybe theoretically generative, Rancière's thought, or 'method of wquality' (see Davidson & Iveson, 2015) can just as instructively be applied to the unspectacular. Rancière has said himself: 'I am not a thinker of the event... but rather of emancipation as something with its own tradition, with a history that isn't just made up of great striking deeds, but also of the ongoing effort to create forms of the common different from the ones on offer' (Rancière cited in Darling, 2013). This history and these efforts are exemplified in Rancière's (2012 [1981]) *Proletarian Nights*, an archival history of working-class intellectualism from below based on workers' theoretical,

organizational and poetical writings penned by candle-light. From these texts, Rancière discerns a political logic in the mundane, showing how these night writers rejected the given ordering of time and space that would delimit them to work and rest, not thought.

A slower, more processual and incremental understanding of dissensus is also at play in Berlant's (2011) conceptualisation of 'the situation' and Ahmed's (2011) writing on feminist 'snap'. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant (2011: 5) opens up a terrain for thinking the event beyond the temporally discrete, determinant, and ruptural by engaging with 'many genres of the emerging event... such as the situation, the episode, the interruption...'. Placing particular emphasis on the ambiguous and the everyday, Berlant (ibid.) describes the situation as a 'state of animated and animating suspension' in which something significant and consequential may or may not unfold 'amid the usual activity of life'. Akin to Pain's (2019) attentiveness to the slow grinding violence of austerity, Berlant points to 'non-evental' mundane geographies of dissensus: 'while sometimes situations organize into world-shifting events or threaten the present with their devastating latency, mostly they do not' (ibid: 6).

Ahmed's idea of the snap further deepens our understanding of everyday dissensus. For Ahmed, snaps are often experienced as personal and embodied, occurring when something is 'revealed to you about the world you had assumed as accommodating' (Ahmed, 2017a: n.p.) and you reach breaking point. Yet snaps are not simply singular moments. Rather, they make apparent and sensible that which has already been under pressure. Nor are snaps only experienced individually; they are also collective. They can be recognised as a reaction to a series of accumulated wrongs that connect people over time and space; they manifest as a common refusal to accommodate ourselves with the part we have been assigned. Multiple snaps can bring people together and build on one another forming collective snappy moments/movements of disidentification: 'multiple moments of snap... accumulate to form the basis of a collective rebellion' (Ahmed, 2017b: 205).

More important than the revolutionary status of an act or event then, are the ways in which people make apparent a wrong and stage their equality. Epistemologically, this suggests that all manner of acts can be recognised as political if they enact a denial and assertion, inaugurating an excess through the dissensual movements of disidentification and identification. This is not to say that 'everything is political'. Rather, it suggests being attentive to the ordinary ways in which dissensus is enacted and equality staged. If much scepticism stems from the understanding that Rancière has sought to prescriptively delineate 'proper politics', a more generative reading of Rancière might engage with what is proper to politics; that is to say, what its logic is and how its universality unfolds in different conjunctures and situated contexts. This approach invites us to think as much with a vocabulary of relations, processes, and prosaics than with privileged forms, striking activisms, and decisive outcomes, and helps us to specify and amplify politicising logics as they emerge from within an open repertoire of actions.

In what follows, I use this understanding of politics – as the unfolding of everyday dissensus in snaps and situations against and beyond the police order – to make sense of the struggle for Lambeth's libraries. Reading the actions and words of councillors, officers, and campaigners (as encountered directly in interview or indirectly in meetings, documents and other media) through the framework developed above, I first examine how Lambeth Council sought to procure consensus for cuts, and then explore how Defend the 10 channelled dissensus against and beyond the slow spoiling of social infrastructure.

Procuring Consensus/Policing Austerity: The cruel optimism of the 'Cooperative Council'

In the context of England's highly centralised model of government, the depth of budget cuts imposed and unevenly downloaded from above by Conservative-led Governments since 2010 augurs a 'new operational matrix' (Peck, 2012) for local government. Evidencing this, a growing literature at regional and urban scales shows how the conditions of existence for local authorities has been strategically reconfigured, through: retrenched grant funding and spatial redistribution (Gray & Barford, 2018); increased pressures towards further privatization, residualization, and responsabilization in public services (Penny, 2017); and the introduction of entrepreneurial and speculative exigencies (Beswick & Penny, 2018). Further work, however, is needed to compliment these urban political economy analyses with more grounded explorations of how austere political dynamics are locally 'encountered', rolled-out, negotiated, and resisted (Raynor & Hitchen, 2016).

Like most other Labour-led administrations in London, home to high inequality and areas of concentrated poverty, the London Borough of Lambeth (LBL) has been at the sharp end of reductions in grant funding over the last decade, with fiscal transfers from the centre halved between 2010 and 2019 (Penny, 2017). Yet, also in line with other Labour Councils in the capital, in that time there has been no outright resistance to austerity led by or involving the politico-administrative leadership of Lambeth.

After its role in the 'rate-capping rebellion' in the mid-1980s – when thirty-two councillors were disqualified from office and fined for refusing to set a legal budget in protest against Thatcher's austerity – the Lambeth Labour Party embraced a centrist and technocratic politics, couching its legitimacy in terms of the competent management of local finances within the confines 'that the objective givens of the situation allow' (Rancière, 1999: 102). Far from inspiring local leaders to push back against central government this time around, the rate-capping rebellion seems to have narrowed their sense of what is politically possible, acceptable, and responsible:

"Unlike the early 1980s it is not an option... to refuse to set a legal, balanced budget. If we did the government would appoint commissioners to run the Council direct from Whitehall imposing cuts with little local understanding or consultation... [We cannot go]... back to the ways of militants... who bankrupted the Council, ruined services for residents and helped destroy the Labour Party's reputation for sensible governance" (Lambeth Councillor (Davie, 2013)).

This is not to say, however, that austerity has been simply 'downloaded' onto a passively resigned council. Rather, the LBL's leadership has willingly rolled-with, and actively sought to procure consent for, austerity by turning towards participatory forms of 'governance-beyond-the state' (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1991).

In May 2010, with austerity on the horizon, the LBL set out its ambition to reshape the settlement between citizens and the state by becoming a self-styled 'Cooperative Council' (CC), embedding models of participatory governance with citizens, communities, and non-profit organisations across the council's services. This would be achieved by: incentivising *"citizens to play a more active role in their local community..."*; opening up a range of new participatory spaces of governance; and, encouraging a *"wide range of service providers (be they social enterprises, cooperatives, public sector*

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3 *organisations, businesses, faith organisations... [etc.]* to “*deliver tailored services*” (LB Lambeth,
4 2011a: 4).
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6 Significantly, the CC did not originate from below out of a demand from community organisations or
7 urban social movements. Rather, it emerged as a top-down intervention, conceived of by the politico-
8 administrative leadership of the borough and refined between 2010 and 2011 through a ‘Cooperative
9 Commission’ that convened eight independent experts alongside three senior councillors. Those
10 assembled reflected the council’s proclivity towards national figures over locally embedded grassroots
11 actors and pointed to a delimited understanding of who counts as an ‘expert’. Of the eight expert-
12 commissioners only one was drawn from a local organisation; the other seven were chosen for their
13 prominent positions in fields of journalism, public policy, the third-sector, and social enterprise.
14 Ideologically, these experts also demonstrated a strong affinity with the reformist centre of the Labour
15 Party and with New Labour’s depoliticising urban policy panaceas: the promulgation of partnerships,
16 outsourcing to professionalized voluntary organisations, and – significantly for the case of Lambeth’s
17 libraries – an emphasis on self-provisioning.
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22 In the Commission’s report *Sharing Power: A new settlement between citizens and state*, the LBL
23 positioned itself within a conjunctural crisis of local government and as being at a “*crossroads*” (LB
24 Lambeth, 2011a: 5) in their “*thinking about how public services should be provided*”. Rehearsing
25 arguments resonant with the Conservative’s Big Society agenda, the LBL suggested that local
26 government, as configured, was incapable of addressing “*the challenges [that] increasingly complex*
27 *and diverse communities face*” (Lambeth, 2011b: 2). Expressed in terms of state excess and civil society
28 lack, the LBL claimed: that local government was too top-down and managerial; that local government
29 was overly paternalistic, “*creating dependency*” (Council Officer Interview); and, that a democratic-
30 deficit characterised relationships between the council and citizens, preventing the full realisation of
31 people’s aspirations. For the then leader of the council, Steve Reed, and many other councillors, the
32 CC thus had intrinsic normative value. A more participatory approach, producing an active and capable
33 citizenry, was justifiable regardless of the funding environment: “*We’d have gone down this path even*
34 *without austerity*” (Councillor Interview).
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39 Significantly, however, the context of imposed retrenchment produced a consequential ambiguity at
40 the heart of the CC. On the one hand, the council was at pains to rhetorically distance its programme
41 from austerity; on the other, it actively mobilised the fact of budget cuts, and the council’s inability to
42 prevent them, to assert the incontrovertible necessity of the CC. Anticipating, and seeking to outflank,
43 local critics suggesting that it was just another way of “*dressing cuts up*” (Council Officer Interview) or
44 outsourcing to the private sector, Reed asserted that Lambeth’s was not an instrumental “*cuts-driven*
45 *agenda*”. Rather, Reed positioned the CC as the only approach that could preserve services and
46 closedown “*the space the right needs to implement large-scale privatisation*” (Reed, 2011).
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50 Rhetorically distancing the CC from austerity did not mean, however, that in a context of a public-
51 deficit ‘crisis’ requirements to make efficiencies were not recognised. Instead, mobilising the
52 optimistic and seemingly neutral ‘doing more for less’ zeitgeist, the council articulated efficiencies and
53 savings as outcomes of the cooperative approach. Echoing ‘the dominant claim... that design can
54 deliver both better outcomes and substantial cost savings’ (Newman, 2013: 521), the council
55 suggested that efficiencies would flow from public participation as decisions made with residents
56 would better reflect local needs and as the latent creative self-provisioning capacities within
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communities would be unleashed. In this way, the CC and austerity urbanism were harmonised, at least in council discourse, with the former positioned as a progressive means of achieving the latter.

Disavowing the violence of austerity, and foreclosing any calls to refuse to enact cuts as unreasonable, the CC was promoted as a sensible and pragmatic urban-governance fix. Without challenging the fiscal givens of the situation, austerity would be smoothly and consensually managed by assigning residents and communities roles as junior partners in the design and delivery of DIY local services. In time, however, as retrenchment cut into a growing number of front-line services, the CC began to resemble less a participatory panacea and more an instance of what Berlant (2006: 21) calls cruel optimism, 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' in which people were in effect summoned to take part in the slow spoiling of their services. Nowhere was this to become more apparent than in the case of Lambeth's libraries.

As part of the CC approach, between January and April 2015 the LBL ran a public consultation on the future of library services, called Culture by 2020. The consultation sought to elicit resident's views on what would be "*significant changes*" that included the possibility of "*the Council no longer providing a service*" (LB Lambeth, 2015a: 3) in some of Lambeth's ten libraries. The forward to the consultation booklet wasted no time in setting out the rationale for the proposed changes. Above any needs or equalities assessment, the exigency of halving the libraries budget by April 2016 shaped the proposals. Yet, while foregrounding tough choices to come, the consultation booklet and supporting material was resolutely upbeat. Combining austere pragmatism with boosterist optimism, the Cabinet report on the consultation opened by stating that:

"The Council is faced with taking decisions that it would not normally like to take, but failing to operate within a legal budget is not an option. Culture 2020 seeks to take an ambitious approach by creating the foundations for growth beyond merely reacting to the unprecedented cuts to our funding" (LB Lambeth, 2015b: 1).

In practice, this "*ambitious approach*" meant three changes. First, Lambeth would meet its statutory requirement to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' service by consolidating funds into five of the ten libraries – Brixton, Clapham, Streatham, West Norwood, and at the Tate South Lambeth library – dubbed Town Centre Libraries. Secondly, Lambeth proposed to sell two of its ten libraries – the Waterloo and Minet Libraries – to property developers (making these the 'spoils' of austerity in a very literal sense). The capital receipts from these buildings, an estimated £3m, would then be used to set up a £10m Community Library Fund, with other unspecified contributions expected. The anticipated revenue from this fund would be used to resource the remaining three downgraded 'neighbourhood' libraries – Carnegie, Durning, and Upper Norwood – on a competitive basis as self-provisioned, and in part self-financing, hubs run by volunteers.

Incongruent with the council's cooperative pretensions, these proposals were developed months before the consultation began by senior council officers without input from the resident-led community group Friends of Lambeth Libraries (FOLL) and "*only with the most basic and ludicrous consultation with the library staff...*" (Campaigner Interview). Furthermore, as was to become clear, little thought had been given to people's willingness and capacity to run their own libraries, the long-term viability of self-provisioned libraries, or the slow spoiling that a self-financing future might foreseeably entail.

Snapping Against Self-Provisioning and the Slow Spoiling of Social Infrastructure

Far from procuring consensus, the Culture by 2020 consultation ignited sustained resistance from residents, FOLL, and library workers culminating in the occupation of Carnegie Library. Before this ‘event’, however, austerity was felt, experienced, and contested in more ordinary, incremental, and undecided ways as people refused to accommodate themselves to the roles set out for them by Lambeth Council as cooperative problem solvers and service providers. Whilst they went to participatory workshops, filled out feedback forms, and even developed business-plans, they rejected the given ordering of time and space through which the council sought to channel their energies and they mobilised against what they saw as a false choice consultation: to accept austerity and the cooperative model; to participate in the slow spoiling of local services; or to lose their libraries. Rather than erupting in spectacular style, dissensus against the consultation process and proposals developed gradually in relatively mundane institutional spaces: in council meetings and workshops, which became ‘key space time[s] of collectivity where austerity [was] present’ (Hitchen, 2019: 7) and politicised.

A consistent area of contention was the budgetary fiat. Speaking about his experiences of facilitating one of seven public consultation events, at the to-be-sold Waterloo Library, one Council Officer regretted the time that it took to explain the necessity of budget cuts and to move people onto the practical ground of problem solving:

“Last night people were crammed into the Waterloo because there was the prospect of them losing their library. We spent the first 10 minutes just putting the money issue to bed and saying irrespective of your political views, of what you think of the bankers, the resource that we have got to play with is this... that is the focus of the conversation. We are having to create a space to have this dialogue and there are some groups who are still very clearly exercised about the money that we have lost rather than the money that we have got”.

Attempts to question the financial envelope for libraries were dismissed out of hand by the council throughout the consultation. Alternative proposals put forward to find savings in other areas of council expenditure – by reducing management costs, the use of consultants, and expensive contracts with private companies – were all rejected. Responding to these ideas, the council stated: *“we need to be constructive in how we address this challenge, but also be realistic given local government is seeing reductions across all revenue budgets”* (LB Lambeth, 2015b: 2). Realism meant, first and foremost, accepting austerity as a given.

Despite assurances that the council was open to considering alternative plans, those who sought initially to work with the council were quickly disappointed when their proposals were ignored by senior councillors and officers:

“We put in a business plan giving them [the LBL] the alternative of building on top of the library and bringing in funding from Heritage Lottery Fund... we have never had any acknowledgement of it at all” (Campaigner Interview).

“The alternative that we have always put forward, jointly as a whole libraries thing, is a staff-community mutual to run all of the library service. And the head of the libraries, [submitted] this plan in April. They [the LBL] just ignored it” (Campaigner Interview).

For the council, a constructive approach was one that worked within the financial envelope set by executive politicians and aligned with the senior officers' policy framework.

Reflecting on the difficulties of working in and against the council on the issue of libraries and parks, one council officer (soon to turn campaigner), spoke of the moment they lost confidence in the consultation. After sending a message from their council email address to residents and community groups "*saying 'save the library... tell Lambeth what you think'*" they were told:

"... that I wasn't allowed to work against 'Lambeth Policy' during a consultation because I work for them... My boss told me 'it would be better if you stayed silent because you shouldn't be working against council policy'. I wrote back saying 'oh yes of course I will do whatever I am told'. Then I wrote back saying, 'actually it is not council policy, it is a consultation'".

Others who attended the consultation meetings articulated similar moments of disillusionment as something was 'revealed to [them] about the world [they] had assumed as accommodating' (Ahmed, 2017a: n.p.). One resident was moved to write a post for the Brixton Blog titled 'Lambeth Culture 2020: do we feel consulted?' (Waters, 2015). They were incensed by an incident that took place towards the end of the meeting when the lead officer commented that "*nothing new had come up today*" (ibid: n.p.). Another attendee was also exercised by that remark, which seemed symptomatic of a lack of genuine engagement with people's capacity to generate ideas:

"The officers were very dismissive of anything that came up at the consultation, one officer said at one point 'there is nothing, I have not heard anything new here tonight'. I mean that just voids the whole consultation... It was so dismissive!" (Community Organisation Interview).

Beyond questioning the consultation process, residents and community groups were ignited by LBL's specific proposals. Going against the grain of the self-provisioning zeitgeist (where "*community groups are moving away from added value and down to delivery*" Council Officer Interview), FOLL pushed back against the creation of a two-tier library service in which community groups would be made responsible for the long-term future of neighbourhood libraries, reminding the council that they "*have said many times over the last three years that we do not have the capacity or the will to take on management of a library*". They also baulked at the "*implicit threat*" in the consultation booklet which warned community groups of the possible consequences of not taking up the council's take-it-or-leave-it offer: "*which could include closure of some buildings*" (LB Lambeth, 2015a: 18).

The consultation closed at the end of April 2015 and the results were expected to be published three months later in July. Throughout the summer, however, the council was quiet on the matter. It was not until early October that *Culture 2020* was unveiled and the reason for the delay became clear. The Culture 2020 plan presented to the Cabinet for approval that month differed in significant ways from the original proposals. Yet, far from assuaging the fears of residents, the council "*came up with something worse*" (Campaigner Interview). Developed within the same financial constraints as previously consulted on, Culture 2020 retained the proposal to distinguish between 'Town Centre' and 'Neighbourhood' libraries. It also confirmed the proposal to sell Waterloo library and transfer Upper Norwood library to 'community' control. But, the plan diverged from the original with respect to the fates of the Carnegie, Minet, Durning and Tate South Libraries.

Emerging after the consultation had closed, from a proposal developed by Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL), a controversial² London not-for-profit who provide the council's leisure services, the new plan involved leasing up to three library buildings – Carnegie, Minet, and either Tate South Lambeth or Durning libraries – to GLL at peppercorn rates. These libraries would be reconfigured as 'healthy living centres' run by GLL as fee-paying gyms, with a much-reduced self-service library and no full-time professional librarians. As such, the council could claim it was keeping most of the borough's library buildings open at no extra financial cost.

Many residents, however, were suspicious of the new plan fearing that it would lead to a slow spoiling of libraries in both senses of the term – as a qualitative 'loss in the everyday' (Robinson & Sheldon, 2019: 111) and as an anticipated accumulation by dispossession (through which libraries become the spoils of property developers):

*"Right from the start it has been dressed up as 'we are not closing the libraries, we are being really imaginative, innovative, and creative, we're going to have lounges and healthy living centres'... it's almost like the cuckoo in the nest... the cuckoo of the gym would push the library into becoming a bookshelf of books, but they'd have no staff. A library is more than a shelf of books... it's about the support you get to access information in a place you can be warm and safe; and if you don't have things at home, or if you don't have friends, if you are lonely and isolated, it is a place you can come"*³

"The suspicion from everyone is that they are trying to put more housing in [place of libraries] so that they can make money. This is the sort of area they can make money. Everyone feels like Lambeth is just trying to make money and to be honest, having met [the head of regeneration], I think that is entirely the agenda... I don't think they've the skill to be anything but a developer" (Campaigner Interview)

At a public Cabinet Meeting in October, anger at the council's library proposals was palpable and people's participation shifted to a more activist register. Describing the scenes that took place outside the meeting, one campaigner spoke of the numbers of people who were incited to attend and protest: *"God, the first meeting in the South of the borough where they actually pushed [the proposals] through! It was absolutely jam packed and they wouldn't let half the people in. People inside were shouting 'let them in! Let them in!'"* (Campaigner Interview). In the meeting, senior councillors and officers faced an equally incensed audience voicing a broad range of grievances and threatening legal action. Councillors' statements were met with spontaneous collective booing in what one participant described as a *"kind of raucous carnivalesque atmosphere"*.

Resistance continued to grow in the weeks after the Cabinet *"rubber stamped"* (Campaigner Interview) the new plan. Working through official channels, FOLL forced a review of the Cabinet's decision at an Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November. Whilst this meeting ended with a slim majority of councillors voting not to send the library proposals back to Cabinet for a full reconsideration, it did reveal stark inconsistencies in and shortcomings of the council's proposals, hardening the resolve of campaigners and library workers. The head of libraries was also granted an opportunity to resubmit the popular staff-community mutual plan.

² GLL has come under union scrutiny for failing to pay its young workers the London Living Wage, for allegedly poor working conditions, and for its anti-union attitude.

³ Carnegie Occupier https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89Q_b_Ue544

As the year drew to a close, campaigners and library workers continued to put pressure on the council: campaigners disrupted council meetings and took to the streets in protest marches, workers staged a walk-out and took strike action, and FOLL made known their plans to launch a Judicial Challenge. At the end of November some library campaigners and workers joined a diverse coalition of local organisations and activists at a community event called 'Another Lambeth is Possible' to discuss the future of local social infrastructure. Focusing on the commonalities between the struggle for libraries and on-going campaigns to prevent the council from demolishing, commercialising, and financialising public and cooperative housing in the borough (see Beswick & Penny, 2018), participants at the event warned of the slow undoing of collectively funded service provision. Those speaking about libraries articulated the reasons for their rejection of the council's proposals, anticipating a future of disinvestment, residualised self-provisioning, and eventual privatisation (Fieldnotes 28.11.16). They disidentified from the cruel optimism of the CC which held out the promise of a post-austerity world of participation, reciprocity, and mutuality whilst simultaneously unravelling the conditions in which such relations might flourish.

By the beginning of 2016 a coherent campaign had emerged to defend Lambeth's libraries. The council workshops and meetings discussed in this section proved critical in the development of this campaign. First, these meetings brought people together from across the Borough's libraries and gave them a common cause: *"the friends of Lambeth libraries has always existed [but] the campaign started when we all started meeting during the first round of consultation"* (Campaigner Interview). Secondly, the meetings functioned as spaces of both revelation (Hitchen, 2019: 8), revealing to people that the CC would only accommodate their participation as junior partners willing to accept austerity, and of anticipation (Horton, 2016), as those participating in these meetings foresaw a spoiled future of disinvestment and dispossession. Finally, these meetings were key space-times in which austerity was felt and contested individually and collectively. For some these meetings were the occasion for a personal snap as they realized the limits of participating in the council's formal process. At other times, more than convening 'a collection of feeling [and snapping] individuals' (Hitchen, 2019: 12), these meetings were also themselves snappy collective episodes; moments in which dissensus became transpersonal.

In the case of Lambeth's libraries, dissensus did not erupt in a singular heroic event. It unfolded as a series of everyday persistent interventions and snaps against the council's logic of distribution (of when, where and how people should participate) and expertise (of what was and was not reasonable or possible) in consultative meetings and workshops. Despite vexed efforts by councillors and officers to convince them otherwise, people refused to accept that the LBL's proposals were in their best interests and disidentified from their assigned parts as creative problem-solving subjects, self-managing the slow spoiling of their services.

The Occupation as Situation: Building political solidarities against and beyond austerity

Early in 2016 a group of residents, FOLL, and library workers formed the Defend the Ten campaign to increase pressure on the LBL. At first glance, this name suggests a campaign whose political horizon was on the defensive and limited to resisting further neoliberal dispossession; a campaign shaped, in other words, more by what they were against than what they were for. However, in a Defend the Ten meeting, one campaigner explained that as well as providing a common banner around which people could convene, Defend the Ten was set up to play *"bad cop"* to FOLL's *"good cop"* (Fieldnotes 26.5.16). Blurring distinctions between active and activist, institutionalised and insurgent, strategies the latter

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continued to engage the council in ‘constructive’ dialogue through official channels, whilst the former acted as a disruptive counter-weight confronting the council’s austerian common sense with excessive alternative senses, including that libraries remain decommodified public spaces of encounter and negotiation, as well as refuge and reinvention, and that residents and staff should equally determine their future. In this way a broad field of counter-conduct was opened up on *and* beyond the terrain of the council, supporting Federici’s (2019: 3) argument that ‘It is impossible... to defend existing communal rights without creating a new reality, in the sense of new strategies, new alliances, and new forms of social organization’.

One of the campaigns first moves in 2016 was to organise a march in support of the staff-community mutual plan, which commanded the firm support of library workers and FOLL. The proposal was developed with the recognition that although residents *“did not wish to take on the running of their local library, they were not against doing so as part of a larger organisation which involved library staff”* (Lambeth Libraries & Archives Staff-Community Mutual Plan, 2016: 12). In contrast to the council’s plan to fragment and residualise the library service, the mutual sought to raise expectations and exceed the ‘cooperative’ imagination of the council by creating a relatively autonomous organisation in which staff and residents (with membership and voting rights open to all over 16) would democratically control the ten libraries with financial support from the council. By bringing residents and workers together, staging their equality and right to decisional power, *“communities [would] not [be] divided and set against each other for sparse resources, but stand together supportively, breaking down social barriers, sharing skills and... pooling resources”* (ibid. 15). In March the council rejected the plan, arguing that it did not align with their policy framework (LB Lambeth, 2016).

Proceeding with the GLL approach, the council committed to closing Carnegie and Minet libraries on the 1st of April. On the day of their closure library residents held candle-lit vigils at both libraries. At dusk, people gathered, tying yellow ribbons on railings, hanging banners outside of the buildings, and chalking messages onto the floor. Unbeknownst to the council around 200 of those convened at Carnegie did not intend to leave that night. Instead, they had been planning its occupation.

From the occupied library, which attracted growing numbers of visitors daily, campaigners were able to put into common sense their counter-narrative to official claims and show their presence was more than a simple act of refusal; it was a positive expression of negation. As well as challenging the council on the technical aspects of the GLL proposal (scrutinising its lack of business case, the floor space the gyms would take up, and whether children would be able to use the library unaccompanied), the campaigners concentrated in one space-time situation their fears of a spoiled future of ‘bookish gyms’ and hope for the autonomous staff-community alternative. Chanting *“Whose library? Our library”* (Robinson & Sheldon, 2019: 117) on the steps of the Carnegie they asserted that libraries are collectively, rather than council, owned spaces. In Vlogs filmed inside they articulated and circulated the value of library spaces as ordinary and ‘quiet forms of democratic connectedness’ (Robinson & Sheldon, 2019: 116) opening up opportunities for encounter and negotiation, refuge and reinvention, welcome and solidarity:

*"The most vulnerable people use the library. This is their refuge... I see people here with mental health issues... people who are lonely, depressed, isolated. They come here and they feel welcome, they feel they belong"*⁴

*"If you ask anyone who has been involved in this occupation, what we all experience I think is a really amazing sense of common purpose and determination... the solidarity and support that we are getting from outside is just extraordinary"*⁵

As well as receiving material support from local residents and businesses – in the form of food, blankets and toiletries – the campaigners were able to generate symbolically powerful support for their cause and garner a substantial online following: messages of solidarity and support soon poured in from across London, throughout the UK, and from as far away as Australia and the USA: *"All day we were giving interviews on TV and radio constantly. We raised the issues... I was staggered by the attention"* (Campaigner Interview). Within days the occupation had far exceeded its signification as a small local protest against the closure of one particular library; it stood in for all public libraries and front line services.

The occupation came to an end nine days after it had begun, following an eviction notice from the council, the threat of legal action, and the sense amongst those involved that they had achieved as much as they could. By then the occupation had dwindled to a core of around 15 people, but it did not end quietly. Buoyed by the media attention, another march was staged that attracted significantly more people than heretofore seen at Defend the Ten events: some 2,000 people. Illustrating the occupation's symbolic power, the procession included groups from across the borough campaigning on issues as varied as evictions, housing demolition, transport infrastructure, and junior doctors pay and working conditions. Many placards on display insisted that 'Another Lambeth is Possible'.

Ultimately, the occupation did not prevent the council from pushing through their plans: Carnegie is now home to a fee-paying gym run by GLL, with much less book space, and library staff on-site for just two-hours a day (Robinson & Sheldon, 2019). When you enter the library today you pass two large empty and locked rooms that were once full of books and children's toys. The children's room is now cramped into a small corner vying for space in the main library space where others come to read and study. The staff on hand are friendly, but for most of the day they are gym reception staff not professional librarians. Yet this spoiling need not be taken as evidence of the occupation's failure, nor as yet another example of post-politics triumphant.

In contrast to how so many experienced the council's public consultation meetings, the occupation was an 'unforeclosed experience' (Berlant, 2011: 5). In the moment it was a snappy situation, a 'state of animated and animating suspension' (ibid.) that forced itself onto people's consciousness and pointed to, even if it did not immediately realize, other kinds of urban worlds (pace Kern & McLean, 2017). After the fact, there are signs that it continues to nourish local struggles in subtle but enduring ways. Capturing a sense of this ambivalence and undecidedness, the academic-activist Katherine Robinson, writing about her experience of returning to Carnegie after the occupation, articulates her sense of loss but also points to persistent everyday forms of dissensus:

'It was hard to stay here – the building was cold and no longer felt inviting and later, it felt painful to write about... Posters tied to the library's railings articulated a counter-rhetoric in

⁴ Carnegie Occupier <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ai3H0fWNVnA&t=20s>

⁵ Carnegie Occupier https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89Q_b_Ue544

the face of council spin that the new arrangement was a success: ‘Lambeth Council Stole Our Library’, ‘Libraries for the many, not Gyms for the Few’, ‘Carnegie Library for Ever’. The posters accumulated, became ragged in the rain and were cleared away by the council, but they were repeatedly refreshed and updated’ (Robinson & Sheldon, 2019: 118).

Whilst the occupation did not endure it nonetheless speaks to an art of duration; it asserted that Lambeth’s libraries should remain fully public. In affirming its publicness, the occupation of Carnegie claimed a space to articulate what libraries could be and asserted the right of people to participate as equals along with library workers in the process of rearticulating and remaking the library beyond depoliticising logics of residualization, responsabilization, and creeping privatisation. Since the occupation and march, Defend the Ten activists have continued to keep the pressure on the LBL through a diversity of ‘persistent interventions’ (Kern & McLean, 2017: 407): from the noisy disruption of full council meetings, in which protestors have forced meetings to be abandoned; to quieter forms of communal remembering, as when, in response to the council/GLL’s promotional exhibition at Carnegie, residents hosted an alternative ‘pop-up’ library in the adjacent park with events *“recreating some of the things we loved about Carnegie Library”*.

The unfolding of dissensus in the case of Defend the Ten can be discerned across the range of active and activist, institutional and insurgent, everyday and situational interventions staged in response to an obdurate council. When the LBL announced their partnership with the GLL, the nature of people’s responses shifted from disidentification in council meetings and workshops, explored in the previous section, towards a positive expression of negation that culminated in the occupation of Carnegie. Far from being simply reactive and responsive, in to the build up to and in the act of occupying Carnegie, people came together, confronted the council’s austerian and spoiling common sense, and dissensually identified with an alternative future of libraries. They insisted on a future of libraries as well-funded and decommodified spaces of human encounter and coexistence controlled from below by residents and library workers.

Conclusion

The struggle to Defend the Ten libraries in Lambeth is one example of how people are encountering and resisting the violence of austerity as it is rolled-out by the local state and as it shrinks our public worlds (Hitchen & Shaw, 2019). Across London and the rest of the UK countless similar struggles are taking place, often with little publicity, as the vital social infrastructures of people’s everyday lives – public housing, youth, community and leisure centres, parks and libraries – are closed, shuttered and demolished outright or just as often, as I have demonstrated here, spoiled more slowly.

Through the notion of the slow *spoiling* of social infrastructure developed in this paper, I have sought to shed light on some of the actual and anticipated consequences of enforced scarcity as experienced and negotiated individually and collectively in the diminished value, quality, and enjoyment of decommodified and (at least potentially) democratic spaces. Whilst not yet definitively lost, the spoiling of these spaces suggests that they are gradually being undone and ground down, their long-term futures compromised, even (or perhaps especially) in cases where supposedly innovative and creative ‘solutions’ – such as the GLL’s bookish-gyms – are found. This reading of how austerity is experienced as an everyday loss builds on Hitchen’s (2019: 20) crucial insight into the indeterminate temporalities of cuts that are not bound to single time-space events but are felt as ongoing conditions of contraction with no clear end or resolution.

Yet, as I hope to have shown here, this shrinking and spoiling of our social infrastructure, of spaces that '*open up worlds*' (Hitchen & Shaw, 2019: np emphasis in original) in which we encounter and negotiate differences and seek refuge and reinvention, need not be read as yet more proof of a post-political closure. Even as the local state seeks to procure consent for fiscal scarcity imposed from above and foreclose discussion about viable alternative futures, people are collectively acting on their deeply held desires for more democratic and just worlds. Yet, in the contemporary context of austerity, disinvestment, and dispossession situations like the Carnegie Occupation, and the protracted processes and persistent interventions that lead up to them, are too easily dismissed, or simply missed, as insignificant or as unsuccessful by epistemologies that emphasise spectacular ruptural events and 'the gestures of heroic action we associate with the political' (Berlant, 2011: 259-260). A second contribution of this paper has therefore been to open up some conceptual space in which to theorise and make visible politics as everyday dissensus.

The notion of everyday dissensus developed here seeks to strike a *via media* between an underspecified optic that sees politics everywhere and an overly delimiting understanding of 'proper' politics as revolutionary rupture. Drawing on Rancière, Berlant, and Ahmed I have argued that we can specify what is proper to politics – the dual dissensual process of refusing the hierarchical logic of the police order (disidentification) and affirming the axiomatic of equality (identification) – without fetishizing privileged forms, striking activisms, and decisive outcomes. Instead, we can trace and perhaps even amplify everyday forms of dissensus as they unfold in situated contexts, not just through 'one-off spectacular events' (Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcàzar, 2019: 387) but also in 'persistent interventions' (Kern & McLean, 2017), embodied and collective 'snaps' (Ahmed, 2017), and indeterminant and contingent 'situations' (Berlant, 2011).

The case of Lambeth's Libraries is in many respects an undecided and ambivalent one. Although the basement of the Carnegie Library is now a GLL gym and the rest of the building has been spoiled for those who knew it as a fully de commodified and professionally staffed space, the emergence of snappy subjectivities that disidentified from elite constructions of cooperative subjectivity and of the Defend the Ten campaign that helped people to collectively identify with the possibility of more autonomous alternatives points to the always present possibility of those who might open worlds back up. With decentralised models of public ownership gaining traction at a national level through the Labour Party, the political confidence, capacity, and optimism channelled locally through the Carnegie Occupation may yet re-emerge to confirm that 'Another Lambeth is Possible'.

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