



**Interrogating Urban Crisis: Cities in the Governance and Contestation of Austerity**

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# Interrogating Urban Crisis: Cities in the Governance and Contestation of Austerity

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## Abstract

The meaning of 'urban crisis', and its applications in concrete struggles to govern and contest austerity urbanism, remains under-specified analytically and poorly understood empirically. This paper addresses the lacuna by opening up the concept of urban crisis to critical scrutiny. It begins by exploring how urban 'crisis-talk' tends to over-extend the concept in ways that can render it shallow or meaningless. The paper looks secondly at different applications of the terminology of 'crisis', disclosing key framings and problematics. In the spirit of critical urban studies, it focuses, thirdly, on practices of crisis-resistance and crisis-making. The paper concludes by summarizing the six urban crisis framings linked to six urban problematics, in order to inform future studies of austerity urbanism and assist in developing more reflexive approaches to the concept.

**Keywords:** urban, crisis, governance, contestation, resistance

## Introduction

In September 2013, De Montfort University in the city of Leicester, UK, hosted an *Urban Studies* and *Urban Studies Foundation* sponsored conference entitled *Interrogating Urban Crisis: Governance, Contestation and Critique*. This special issue is one outcome, comprising nine papers presented at the conference and a critical commentary by Professor Tim May. The special issue appears nearly a decade after perhaps the greatest shock in the history of post-war capitalism, the 2008 crash. Yet, the crash has not translated into a full-blown crisis of capitalism, or neoliberalism described by Anderson (2000: 7) as the ‘most successful ideology in world history’. With the exceptions explored in the special issue (Arampatzi, 2017; Blanco and León, 2017, Watkins, 2017 – all this issue), the grip of neoliberalism seems ever-tighter, as authorities to the left and right of the political spectrum roll out more-or-less draconian austerity measures, with remarkable success in further eroding –even erasing - the legacies of post-war welfarism.

The puzzle we address is that if neoliberalism is the most successful ideology in world history, what does it mean to invoke the concept of ‘crisis’, urban or otherwise? As Clarke commented after the crash (2010: 342) ‘the word crisis has been everywhere’. Urban scholarship, long renowned for its preoccupation with crises (Weaver, 2017 this issue), has been ever more attentive to the concept, especially in relation to austerity (Peck, 2012). Yet, there is still, as Hay (1999: 319) observed nearly 20 years ago, ‘notorious imprecision’ in the use of the term, particularly in light of the remarkable capacity of capitalist institutions to survive instability, tumult and crash.

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3           In this paper, we seek to unravel the “crisis puzzle” by problematising the  
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5 concept in a way that makes it more legible, precise and applicable as a tool of  
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7 analysis. The papers in the special issue explore a range of structural and  
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9 constructive approaches to crisis and its antonyms through the lens of governing and  
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11 contesting austerity urbanism (cf. Blanco, Griggs and Sullivan, 2014: 3136).  
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13 Accordingly, we point to the need for a reflexive approach to ‘urban crisis’, especially  
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15 in the face of normalised austerity politics. This issue is not merely of scholastic  
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17 interest. The diagnosis of crisis is pivotal to grasping the potentialities for  
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19 transformative urban politics.  
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25           The paper proceeds in three steps. It first captures the multiplicity of  
26  
27 approaches to urban crisis found in the literature on cities and austerity: structure,  
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29 alienation, politics, construction, conceptual limits and tipping points. It proceeds to  
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31 explore studies of urban resistance through this framework, and finally reflects on  
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33 the implications of the discussion for future research and introduces the special  
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35 issue papers.  
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### 41 **Diagnosing Urban Crisis**

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44           As Weaver (2017 this issue) records, the concept of urban crisis retains  
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46 enormous traction, not only within Marxism (Castells, 1977; Merrifield, 2002; Boyle,  
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48 2011), but also the cultural urbanisms associated with post-structuralism (Katoaka,  
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50 2009; Beauregard, 2012) and within neoliberalism, where it is invoked against  
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52 cultural pathologies and bloated public bureaucracies (e.g. Moynahan, 1965). ‘Crisis’  
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54 assumes a plurality of analytical guises spanning Marxism, post-structuralism,  
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3 neoclassicism and cultural theory spanning spatial, temporal, class, racial, gendered,  
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5 economic, political, democratic, environmental and security domains.  
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9 In the literatures on austerity urbanism with which we are here preoccupied,  
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11 we encounter myriad crisis-imbued readings of exemplary and punitive city  
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13 bankruptcies, foreclosures, racist violence and class brutalisation, particularly in the  
14  
15 American literature (Eisinger, 2014; Davidson and Ward, 2014). US focused research  
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17 on the radicalisation of the neoliberal offensive has been particularly influential in  
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19 studies of austerity urbanism, perhaps contributing to the “apocalyptic’ tone Angotti  
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21 (2006) accused Mike Davis (2006) of in *Planet of Slums*. Peck (2012: 630), for  
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23 example, interpreted austerity governance as the unstable relationship between  
24  
25 state and market, leading to a “roiling’ phase of neoliberal development (2012: 650)  
26  
27 characterised by ‘crisis management and instability’ (Peck, 2012: 631). To the extent  
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29 that austerity is normalised, it is a “state of normalcy at the very cusp of crisis’ (Peck,  
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31 2012: 651).  
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38 Peck, Brenner and and Theodore (2013) stress the adaptivity and durability of  
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40 variegated neoliberalism. Nevertheless, the language of crisis can seem out of place.  
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42 The capitulation of Syriza in July 2015 severely damaged the Greek anti-austerity  
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44 revolt (Arampatzi, 2017 this issue). At the same time, perhaps partly as a  
45  
46 consequence of the Greek disaster, the anti-austerity surges of 2011 have not  
47  
48 recurred with anything like the same energy or on the same scale. Part of the  
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50 explanation also lies in the capacity for neoliberal variegation (Peck, Brenner and  
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52 Theodore, 2013: 1091). And, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) revealed, this ‘new  
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54 spirit of capitalism’ is infectious, recuperating and remaking the 1968-generation of  
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3 militants in its own image. Such agility in the face of a disastrous crash and near-  
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5 global revolt is the marker of a formidable hegemony, though every successful  
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7 manoeuvre generates new antagonisms and unintended consequences.  
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11 The special issue attests that this is by no means the only story, but the  
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13 muting of revolt and relentless advance of austerity creates a fertile climate for  
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15 passivity and resentment: the former reflected in the crisis of representative  
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17 democracy, the latter through the Brexit referendum and ascent to the US  
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19 presidency of Donald Trump (though neither outcome should be attributed  
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21 simplistically to racism). The urban determinations and counter-currents to the right  
22  
23 wing “populist’ surge remain to be properly understood, as they evolve over time.  
24  
25 However, it is not yet clear in what sense these events herald ‘crisis’, as such or for  
26  
27 whom. The crisis-potential embodied in the schism between ‘globalists’ and  
28  
29 ‘nationalists’ should not be under-estimated, but the wisdom of hindsight warns us  
30  
31 that neoliberal currents may adapt by re-territorialising and further radicalising  
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33 market-making and workfare policies, as the UK appears set to do post-Brexit. Our  
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35 question, then, is whither ‘urban crisis’?  
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43 Janet Roitman’s (2014) *Anti-Crisis* is a philosophical provocation to re-consider  
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45 crisis in light of elisions she sees throughout social theory and political economy. She  
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47 argues that among all the key terms in the lexicon of critical theory (such as state,  
48  
49 capitalism and neoliberalism), ‘crisis’ has been the only one to escape de-  
50  
51 construction. She calls crisis a ‘blind-spot’, a ‘transcendental place-holder’ (2014: 94-  
52  
53 5). This means that however the term is employed, it reifies ‘contingency’, in the  
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55 sense that the potential for social change is pre-given in the concept. Roitman makes  
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3 a vitally important point. A nuanced reading of 'crisis' would open the door to a  
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5 better appreciation not only of how urban economies, politics and societies break  
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7 down, recompose and transform, but also how political normalcy and inertia  
8  
9 become entrenched even in the face of economic disasters, grievous suffering and  
10  
11 heroic resistance. We elicit six crisis-framings with linked intellectual and political  
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13 problematisations, to guide future research. These are structure, alienation, politics,  
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15 construction, the limits of crisis and tipping points summarised in table 1 (below).  
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18 We discuss each of these in turn.  
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## 22 **Structure**

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26 Marxist perspectives on the contradictory structures of capitalist modernity  
27  
28 remain influential, if only as background factors, in the diagnosis of urban crises. The  
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30 structural proposition in Marxist thought is that as capitalism ages and globalises, it  
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32 becomes prone to ever-deeper and more contagious slumps and shallower booms. It  
33  
34 can counter these trends in various ways, by increasing rates of class exploitation  
35  
36 and subsuming new spaces to market relations (Harvey, 2005). However, expansion  
37  
38 becomes progressively harder to accomplish because as more of the globe is  
39  
40 subsumed, market relations become congested, expansionary space harder to find  
41  
42 and older capitalisms stagnate. Expressed from an agentic point of view, the Marxist  
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44 claim is that for as long as human beings engage in capitalist practices these will  
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46 produce structural contradictions of the kind identified by Marx, regardless of ideas,  
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48 beliefs and preferences. This is why Marxists insist that capitalism should be  
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50 understood as a 'system' exercising propulsive force, with both centrifugal and  
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3 centripetal dynamics. Economic crashes are the innate property of this system  
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5 (Davies, 2013).  
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9           With these or similar background assumptions, Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu  
10 (2017 this issue) show how 'urban crisis' derives from the way structural tendencies  
11 materialize concretely and unevenly in space-time. Since the 1970s, the dominant  
12 European problematic has been de-industrialization and state rescaling, whose  
13 Spanish case is analysed by Martí-Costa and Tomàs (2017 this issue). Cities and city-  
14 regions may best be understood as 'institutional forcefields' through which  
15 contradictions are mediated, particularized, deflected and intensified (Brenner, Peck  
16 and Theodore, 2013). For Martí-Costa and Tomàs, economic crisis creates the  
17 impetus for waves of state rescaling, from which perspective the evolution of urban  
18 governance is most fruitfully interpreted. The specific contours of urban crisis in  
19 Spain after 2008 arose from the confluence of three macro-processes: the transition  
20 from Fordism to post-Fordism, reconfigurations of the welfare state and the role of  
21 urban social movements.  
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40           Parts of the special issue reads like an urban version of what Wolfgang  
41 Streeck (2017) identifies as the generalised crisis of the capitalist state in his recent  
42 Adorno Lecture: the long neoliberal transformation of post-war capitalism since the  
43 1970s raising debt to hegemony over taxation and ushering in in what he terms the  
44 'consolidation state' of today. Central to his argument is the changing relationship  
45 between capitalism and democracy and the advancing immunization of the former  
46 against the latter. In this context, cities are not merely 'derivative or miniature of  
47 wider societal or economic dynamics' (Zimmermann, 2012: 299). They are active  
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3 players. Blanco and León point out how local and regional governments in Spain  
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5 encouraged economic speculation and debt as national government set strong fiscal  
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7 incentives for homeownership. This debt-fuelled economy exploded in 2008.  
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11 The devolution of responsibility from the central to the local level is also seen  
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13 as a means of managing deep structural accumulation crises (Davies and Blanco,  
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15 2017). Watkins' depiction of the UK (2017 this issue) is a prime example, where 'de-  
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17 centralisation' means that guaranteed local state provision of services is replaced by  
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19 the injunction to exercise personal responsibility in order to ease the fiscal crisis of  
20  
21 the state. At the same time, these processes are typically hierarchical and coercive.  
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23 Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu (2017 this issue) show that in Turkey the central state  
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25 plays a decisive role in economic boosterism and facilitates dispossessions by  
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27 reorganising planning powers and property rights (also Bayırbağ 2010). This  
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29 development has been accompanied by deepening centralization, leading to  
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31 authoritarian policy regimes. Urban regeneration is 'forced marketisation' (Aalbers,  
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33 2013). The British cases further exemplify this duality, where crisis governance is  
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35 characterised on the one hand by national government authoritarianism and on the  
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37 other by the hollowing out of the local state welfare function and its substitution by  
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39 an entrepreneurial or boosterist ethos. Thus, Fuller and West (2017 this issue)  
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41 contend, Birmingham City Council sees no choice but to act as the entrepreneur.  
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50 To return again to Streeck, he argues that the 2008 crisis and its aftermath  
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52 represent the exhaustion of these neoliberal strategies from the standpoint of their  
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54 efficacy for capital accumulation. Yet, they continue unabated and intensified. If so,  
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56 we are in a period where structural contradictions cannot be resolved without the  
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3 eruption of crises, if at all, and all governments do is 'buy time'. Or, to put it in  
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5 Marxist language, the neoliberal hegemony presides over a crisis-ridden, if not  
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7 bankrupt, accumulation regime.  
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11 Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu (2017) identify a further axis of contradiction  
12  
13 between systemic trends and everyday (urban) life, analysed through the lens of  
14  
15 alienation theory. To express this in Lefebvrian language, daily urban life becomes  
16  
17 saturated by routine, repetitive and familiar practices, which contain alienation. At  
18  
19 the same time, routines run up against contradictions or discordant experiences. For  
20  
21 example, the promise of an open, affective networked society linked to the  
22  
23 celebration of informational capitalism is everywhere broken in the everyday  
24  
25 experience of atomization, stress and marginalisation among urban-dwellers, able  
26  
27 only to view these goods from an unbridgeable distance (Davies, 2011, 2012). Critical  
28  
29 urban studies reveal many other more-or-less fundamental axes of contradiction  
30  
31 that vary in space-time because of the partial, uneven and contested nature of  
32  
33 capitalist development itself. For heuristic purposes, the problematic foregrounded  
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35 by structural framings of crisis is that of *disclosure*: what are the urban fault-lines in  
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37 capitalist development in general and austerity urbanism in particular?  
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#### 44 45 **Alienation**

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48 Beyond, though linked to disclosure, is the question of translating  
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50 contradictions into fully articulated urban crises. This is a political problem because,  
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52 as Gramsci observed, structural economic crises do not in themselves generate  
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54 societal ruptures (1971: 184). Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu reconsider this problem  
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56 through the lens of the Marxist concept of alienation. Alienation is a universal  
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3 property of capitalist social relations, constituted in the 'fatal schism' between  
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5 'profit-seekers ... and wage earners' (Kunkel, 2011: 9). It arises materially through  
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7 dispossessing the worker of her labour power, and psychologically through the  
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9 trauma separation engenders.  
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13 Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu identify two social fields, the economic structure  
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15 and urban political system, where alienation is contained through a multitude of  
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17 mechanisms. For example, governance bolsters boundaries within cities. In spite of  
18  
19 stressing network orientation and participation we observe how governance in the  
20  
21 face of crisis has become more hierarchical (cf. Davies 2011). Though there is an  
22  
23 apparent 'flattening' of urban governing processes as exemplified by entrepreneurial  
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25 forms of urban partnership (e.g. Watkins 2017 this issue), these conceal new  
26  
27 hierarchies, which in turn conceal power-dynamics. Against the dominant framing  
28  
29 that 'there is no alternative' the 'expertocratic' technocracy determines who has  
30  
31 access to governance arrangements and who does not. In the UK, the urban  
32  
33 quangocracy insulates policies and spending decisions from public scrutiny  
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35 illustration (Watkins, 2017 this issue). These are powerful containment mechanisms.  
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43 Urban crises occur, in May's sense of 'upheaval' when containment fails, as  
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45 it has done repeatedly since 2008, almost always emerging in an urban form. To  
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47 borrow Lefebvrian language once again, urban political life has the propensity to  
48  
49 breach containment mechanisms and, moreover, to pose universalizing claims: 'we,  
50  
51 the people' (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017). For Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu, the value  
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53 of this perspective on containment and breach is that it situates everyday life and  
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55 system dynamics in an intelligible relationship, without reducing the one to the  
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3 other. The framework is sensitive to urban particularities, but in a way that links  
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5 them inextricably to global trends. Practically, the approach opens up the potential  
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7 for comparative analysis, which they apply in discussing instances of breach in the  
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9 2008 period. From a critical urban studies perspective, alienation therefore  
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11 problematizes the political economy of containment and breach. Its focal point is  
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13 *crisis-making*: how can contradictions be politicized and revolts against austerity  
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15 urbanism fomented?  
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## 20 **Politics**

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23 The problematic of 'crisis-making' inevitably brings us to the terrain of  
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25 politics, replete with warnings that the concept of 'urban crisis' must be handled  
26  
27 deftly. Immersion for too long in the epistemic communities of urban studies might  
28  
29 lead us to believe that the *Marxist* left owns the concept of crisis. This is not the  
30  
31 case. In the UK, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978) famously charted how confecting  
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33 a moral panic around mugging allowed the right to set an 'authoritarian populist'  
34  
35 tone, which opened up the space for it to confer blame for Britain's ills on enemies  
36  
37 within: the unions for leaving the dead unburied, benefit 'scroungers' and foreigners  
38  
39 for 'swamping' British culture. The right ended up 'owning' the crisis of the late  
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41 1970s, though winning battles on the ideational terrain and fomenting divisions that  
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43 aided it in smashing the industrial trade unions during the 1980s (also Hay, 1999).  
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50 In the special issue, Weaver (2017 this issue) argues similarly that in the USA,  
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52 the meanings attached to the term 'urban crisis' are rooted in two distinct  
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54 frameworks. One, explored in previous paragraphs, locates the origin of urban crisis  
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56 in structural forces and dispossessions, while another locates it in cultural  
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3 pathologies and immorality, with highly racialised connotations. Echoing Hall *et al*,  
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5 Weaver found that the 1970s were crucial in securing the hegemony of cultural  
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7 pathology-based conceptions of crisis, which contributed to propagating  
8  
9 neoliberalism.  
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13 From a somewhat different perspective, May (2017 this issue) observes, ‘the  
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15 very idea of upheaval is regarded as core to the forward march of fundamentalist  
16  
17 free-market ideologues’. Hinkley (2017 this issue) takes up a related theme in her  
18  
19 study of four US cities, which identifies urban crisis governance as the purposefully  
20  
21 disruptive strategy of neoliberal elites. She examines the experience of fiscal crisis in  
22  
23 the four cities highlighting the narratives used by city and state government to  
24  
25 construct urban crisis. The cause of the observed crisis, she asserts, is now attributed  
26  
27 less to social spending, compared with previous crises, and more in terms of local  
28  
29 governance failures, public pension commitments and global economic turmoil. In  
30  
31 the hegemonic story-line, it is the alleged lack of political will to reduce  
32  
33 commitments to city employees and residents that drives the crisis. Consequently,  
34  
35 rather than developing a vision for a possible government response to a crisis-prone  
36  
37 economy, it has become common sense to blame government, ‘make tough  
38  
39 decisions’ and adapt to the new economic reality. Claims about municipal  
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41 governance failure, incompetence and bloated public pension schemes are  
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43 warranted by a prime directive to deliver ‘fiscal responsibility’.  
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52 The scaling and re-scaling of the state is a further dimension of the  
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54 ‘ownership’ problematic. Martí-Costa and Tomàs show how the EU was crucial in  
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56 recuperating the notion of crisis and imposing the austerity regime in Spain.  
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3 Austerity politics have been accompanied by re-centralisation at the expense of local  
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5 governments, partly as a way of coping with resurgent Catalan nationalism. EU  
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7 governance, and its ambiguous role as the cause and putative solution of the urban  
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9 crisis, is also made explicit, unsurprisingly, in Arampatzi's account of Athens where  
10  
11 fiscal discipline has led to an extraordinarily brutal crisis of social reproduction.  
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15 These studies reveal how easily the concept of crisis is recuperated, and  
16  
17 hence that it should be invoked carefully. At the same time, political agency matters  
18  
19 in crisis-construal, as Martí-Costa and Tomàs conclude in highlighting how urban  
20  
21 social movements variegate and delimit the response. The major problematic of  
22  
23 framing the urban crisis politically is that of the struggle for *ownership*: who decides  
24  
25 what crisis this is and who is to blame? We discuss this issue further in the following  
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27 section on contestation and resistance.  
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### 32 33 **Construction** 34

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36 One of the key contributions in Roitman's (2014) critique was to disclose the  
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38 subjectivities inherent in claims about crisis. As the political framing attests, to talk  
39  
40 about urban crisis, or reject crisis-talk, is part of a struggle to produce meaning  
41  
42 conducted through ideas, discourses and logics (Barbehön and Münch, 2017; Fuller  
43  
44 and West, 2017 – both this issue). Interpretive comparison focuses on how 'urban  
45  
46 crisis' attaches to specific meanings and representations in different socio-spatial  
47  
48 contexts. Austerity urbanism does not mean the same thing, and nor does it carry  
49  
50 the same political weight in different cities operating within ostensibly similar  
51  
52 national and regional frameworks. Crisis-meanings are produced through local  
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54 reasoning, imbued with histories, cultures and traditions.  
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3           What becomes apparent across the special issue is how certain narratives of  
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5 what the crisis means are related to specific policy responses. Rather than treating  
6  
7 policy-making as the solution to problems, as the policy cycle implies, it seems that  
8  
9 'policy solutions go looking for problems' (Stone 2002: 11). Fuller and West disclose  
10  
11 how certain constructions of crisis pave way for governance responses. They dissect  
12  
13 how austerity programs and accompanying cuts to public services become accepted  
14  
15 by urban governing agents, themselves 'gripped' by certain hegemonic narratives  
16  
17 (also Davies and Blanco, 2017). In the course of this process, a dominant macro-  
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19 economic discourse gets articulated and embedded in local discourse. Crisis-talk has  
20  
21 no necessary efficacy in articulating grievances into new 'discursive chains' capable  
22  
23 of challenging the dominant discourse. Perhaps the contrary is also true. If 'crisis  
24  
25 talk' reinforces despair and demoralisation, it can inhibit 'crisis making' in the sense  
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27 of re-politicization. This is to suggest there is nothing necessarily energising or  
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29 politicising about the language of crisis.  
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36           Barbehön and Münch apply a discourse-analytical approach in analysing  
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38 media and local government textual sources, to disclose the collective imaginaries of  
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40 cities; how they position themselves and make sense of their prospects post-2008.  
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42 Frankfurt represents itself as a self-confident city, where crisis is exteriorised in the  
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44 sense that difficulties are due to factors beyond the city's control, such as ailing  
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46 Federal and State finances. Dortmund, on the other hand, portrays crisis as a visceral  
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48 threat to its urban life and itself as lacking political and economic agency.  
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50 Birmingham attaches crisis to the failure of leadership and institutional  
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52 incompetence. Glasgow takes the opposite tack in mobilizing a spirit of  
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3 collaboration, where the resources to overcome adversity can be found within the  
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5 city itself. The problematic to which crisis-construction therefore gives rise, is  
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7 *subjectivity*: how do the identifications and practices of actors intersect with  
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10 discourses, logics and collective imaginaries in a way that produces myriad textured  
11  
12 constructions of 'urban crisis'?

### 15 **The Limits of Crisis**

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18 To re-iterate, crisis-talk does not necessarily produce upheaval. Upheaval in  
19  
20 the sense of perpetual churn within neoliberal capitalism is 'normal', such as the  
21  
22 breathless exhortation to change and innovate. Upheaval in the sense of revolt is not  
23  
24 normal. The Greek term 'krisis' denotes a decisive and unexpected turning-point,  
25  
26 where an immediate decision is made necessary (Haus and Kuhlmann, 2013: 7; Hay,  
27  
28 1999). What most of our authors observe is not so much dramatic change in the  
29  
30 face of crisis but rather more of the same neoliberal remedy, step-by-step. What  
31  
32 Hinkley (2017 this issue) argues with regard to the US holds true for most of the  
33  
34 cases in this volume: The vision of lean government, the practices of crisis  
35  
36 management, the taken-for-granted precariousness and focus on entrepreneurialism  
37  
38 is 'the new normal'.  
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46 Weaver poses the pertinent question of whether crisis, understood as  
47  
48 'upheaval', is an appropriate vocabulary for describing this kind of routine 'suffering  
49  
50 and plunder'. Reinforcing Fuller and West's perspective on acquiescence, he argues  
51  
52 there is little sense that the US stands at a critical point in which elites are under  
53  
54 assault or radical alternatives seem irresistible. For him, the notion of 'urban crisis' is  
55  
56 of questionable value in such conditions. As Roitman (2014) also argued, the  
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3 concept becomes analytically redundant if it applies everywhere, all the time. Crisis  
4  
5 must therefore be differentiated from its antonyms, normality or equilibrium.  
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9 If normality or equilibrium is one antonym, another might be the notion of  
10 flourishing or vitality. Weaver (2017 this issue) explains how these ideas are  
11 mobilised by the right, through the celebration of “triumphant”, ‘comeback cities’.  
12  
13 ‘People with means are flocking to central cities to enjoy the vibrant restaurant and  
14 entertainment scenes in districts that had formerly been abandoned after dark.  
15  
16 Some are even spurning the suburbs to live in newly cleansed urban centres’.  
17  
18 However, critical urban studies utilize vitality too. Arampatzi and Blanco and León  
19 (2017 this issue) both chart how insurgents build practical solidarities, prefiguring  
20 new ways of living – what Walliser (2013) called ‘new urban activism’. These  
21 practices do not disguise the privations of austerity, but downplay the notion of  
22 ‘crisis’ as upheaval in favour of a practical, performative politics of ‘doing’ and  
23 remaking the world around them (Holloway, 2010).  
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38 The framing of limits to the concept of crisis is to recognise that to be useful,  
39 there must be something outside. Gramsci’s notion of ‘catastrophic equilibrium’  
40 neatly captures the liminal time between ‘crisis’ and ‘normality’, describing a  
41 situation in which ‘the old is dying yet the new cannot be born’ and when ‘a great  
42 variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (Gramsci, 1971: 327). The problematisation to  
43 which this framing give rise is that of *boundaries*: how to position ‘crisis’ in relation  
44 to antonyms such as flourishing, vitality, containment, equilibrium, slow-time and  
45 normalcy. Delimiting crisis in this way helps with political diagnosis and judgment by  
46 making the phenomenon more legible: the better to recognise it, grasp its  
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3 constructions and subjectivities, and appreciate that crisis-making is a fundamentally  
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5 political struggle.  
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### 8 **Tipping Points** 9

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11 Finally, urban crisis in the sense of upheaval draws attention to tipping  
12 points. Upheaval is pregnant with opportunities and threats. One scenario (as May,  
13 2017 this issue, puts it) is the belief that the seeds of a better future are immanent in  
14 the present, the foundational premise of critique. In another scenario, hopelessness  
15 triumphs, 'absorbing its critical, transformative potential'. For example, the New  
16 Spirit of Capitalism absorbed the revolutionary energies of the 1960s, the  
17 *Risorgimento* those of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy in a process Callinicos (2011), following  
18 Gramsci, called 'revolution-restoration'. Tipping points are strongly linked to the  
19 question of ownership.  
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34 Perhaps May's most significant point is his sense that we are moving from  
35 slow to fast-time, a notable harbinger of crisis linked to the sense discussed earlier,  
36 that the economic precariousness of the neoliberal model belies its political  
37 hegemony. He argues that the papers in the special issue point to an 'increase in the  
38 intensity of oscillations between continuity and discontinuity'. Another way of  
39 putting this might be to suggest that urban history is speeding up, with an increasing  
40 rate of disturbances within Gramsci's 'catastrophic equilibria'. From an optimist's  
41 perspective, speed-up presents the opportunity for theorists and activists to learn  
42 more quickly from past mistakes, such as how to preserve protest energies when the  
43 occupied squares are cleared and translate them into durable practices in everyday  
44 life, communities and workplaces in the next phase (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017;  
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3 Arampatzi, 2017; Blanco and León, 2017 – all this issue). Sensitivity to the ever-  
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5 present dangers of recuperation, eschewing triumphalism during brief eruptions,  
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7 and focusing diligently on what must be done next means according due recognition  
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9 to the question of the problem of *indeterminacy* in urban crises.  
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## 12 13 **Resisting and Re-Making Urban Crises** 14 15

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17 The objective of critical urban research is to disclose ways in which dominant  
18  
19 framings of crisis are resisted, containment is breached and subjects politicized, to  
20  
21 thereby cast light on how crises might be remade in a completely different way. Our  
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23 aim here, on the one hand, is to point to similarities across various instances of  
24  
25 contestation so as to provide the reader with clues about how to further examine  
26  
27 ‘politics of upheaval’ around a clearly defined research agenda, and increase the  
28  
29 effectiveness of such mobilisations. On the other hand, our heuristic (table 1)  
30  
31 provides a lens through which to scrutinise the variations, successes and failures in  
32  
33 mobilisations across the global landscape of urban capitalism. In this section we  
34  
35 discuss insights developed in three papers dedicated specifically to answering the  
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37 question, ‘how urban crisis is contested’?  
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### 43 **The Roots of ‘new urban activisms’** 44 45

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47 As we previously suggested, when particular neoliberal governing strategies  
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49 fail, authorities appear to return to or radicalise containment strategies they have  
50  
51 already tried. The most obvious one is an active pursuit of a divide-and-rule strategy  
52  
53 targeting the contesters, trying to co-opt leaders via a series of tactics that could be  
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55 explicated with reference to Foucault’s ‘technologies of power’. Yet, this strategy has  
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3 a serious defect, given the gap in everyday urban politics between what is promised  
4 and what is actually delivered (Watkins, 2017 this issue). In fact, the harm caused by  
5 economic crises is distributed 'unevenly... among socio-economic groups' (Blanco  
6 and León, 2017 this issue). Unevenness finds its spatial expression in the  
7  
8 exceptionally heavy price paid by certain localities, like Athens or Madrid. Behind  
9  
10 unevenness lies an economic policy promoting a growth model based on urban rent,  
11  
12 vanity schemes and prestige developments. The resultant austerity urbanism, often  
13  
14 intensified by debt incurred through speculation, comes to the scene as an unevenly  
15  
16 experienced and challenged phenomenon (Davies and Blanco, 2017). Contesting  
17  
18 urban crisis then inevitably becomes a place-based phenomenon (Arampatzi, 2017 –  
19  
20 this issue) where the role of localities and communities struggling over the meaning  
21  
22 and ownership of crisis becomes the focus of our analysis. We address two issues  
23  
24 here: 1) the relationship between containment strategies and contestation; and 2)  
25  
26 how 'spatio-temporally determinate contradictions and fault-lines' translate into  
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28 political responses that seek to 'own the crisis' through a repertoire of  
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30 representational and organisational strategies and tactics.  
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41 One major containment strategy is that of (re)shaping the 'social capital' of  
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43 activists around a 'consensus' based participatory politics, with the promise of  
44  
45 positive re-distributional consequences. Yet, potentially negative distributional  
46  
47 consequences (under austerity urbanism) trigger discontent on the part of  
48  
49 community leaders. As Watkins (2017 this issue) shows, such tensions are inevitable  
50  
51 because what is actually delivered is 'in profound contradiction, with their [the  
52  
53 activists'] collective identities, motivations and practices' (Watkins, 2017 this issue).  
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3 The contradictory nature of participatory containment strategies produces an  
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5 unintended outcome in the form of resistance, though it may not be conceived in  
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7 ideological anti-austerity terms.  
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11           Containing alienation requires that public authorities/elites have the  
12  
13 necessary capacity to act upon the crisis. Yet, it may well be that they run out of  
14  
15 options. Then, 'the inaction of public authorities and the incapacity of the main  
16  
17 opposition parties ... to effectively address a crisis' (Blanco and León, 2017 this issue)  
18  
19 opens up a space for anti-austerity forces.  
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23           In examples, such as Watkins' case study of the East Midlands, where  
24  
25 activists are 'in touch' with the public authorities, contestation can develop if leaders  
26  
27 retain a healthy distance, whilst engaging with them. Then, 'local participation' can  
28  
29 backfire turning it into a source and venue for challenging hegemonic thinking.  
30  
31 Then, politics overflows normality and containment is breached at least to a degree.  
32  
33 The potential for crisis-making in everyday breaches may be realised, if activists  
34  
35 foster and maintain long-term collective interests/identity/practices (within  
36  
37 community) and retain a clear sense of separation from the state.  
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43           But how exactly can this progression occur? The clues are in the three key  
44  
45 processes of consensus building that seek to recuperate the rebels: 'historical (an act  
46  
47 of forgetting), spatial (physical reconstruction), and discursive (the adoption of new  
48  
49 language and practices)' (Watkins, 2017 this issue). An effective contestation  
50  
51 strategy can really 'flourish' when the contesters begin to design their own socio-  
52  
53 economic order and its territoriality even as they remain 'in touch' with the  
54  
55 authorities, thereby adopting a "symbiotic' or 'complementary' contestation  
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3 strategy (Arampatzi, 2017 – this issue). This approach is redolent of the old “in and  
4  
5 against the state” perspective (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). It  
6  
7 remains to be seen what lessons those advocating such an approach today learn  
8  
9  
10 from their predecessors (e.g. Newman, 2012).  
11

12  
13 If we are to understand how ‘spatio-temporally determinate contradictions  
14  
15 and fault-lines’ are translated into a political response capable of claiming ownership  
16  
17 of the crisis, we need to problematize the *socio-political infrastructure* of  
18  
19 contestation. Resistance may emerge spontaneously, but organised contestation  
20  
21 does not flourish overnight. What the activists do is rather rework the infrastructure,  
22  
23 by revitalising pre-existing networks of solidarity over time, while expanding the  
24  
25 social base in an attempt to ignite the masses, as occurred the cases of Greece and  
26  
27 Spain (Arampatzi, 2017; Blanco and León, 2017 – both this issue). As previously  
28  
29 suggested, an institutionalised interface between the contesters and formal politics  
30  
31 could well serve the ends of resistance when the time is ripe (Watkins, 2017 this  
32  
33 issue). Neighbourhood associations that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s in Spain,  
34  
35 for instance, seem to have constituted the socio-political infrastructure of a ‘new  
36  
37 cycle of (urban) social mobilisations in Spanish cities’. While their leaders were co-  
38  
39 opted and joined formal politics during the 1980s and 1990s, their institutionalised  
40  
41 presence in the cities offered a fruitful ground to start this second wave of  
42  
43 mobilisation in the 2000s (Blanco and León, 2017 this issue). Apparently, such  
44  
45 interfaces, though unintentionally, contribute towards the historical continuity of  
46  
47 resistance. Hence, contestation and resistance are the product of many layers of  
48  
49 historical experience and experimentation, where each layer arises from a particular  
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3 period of urban crisis, recuperated or pacified by the political establishment at  
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5 earlier tipping points, only to take a new form in the coming period with new  
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7 discourses and political agents added to the scene. Put simply, instruments of  
8  
9 containment can, in the right circumstances become instruments of breach.  
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### 12 13 **Constructing alternatives**

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16 The construction of 21<sup>st</sup> century alternatives to austerity and resistance is  
17  
18 often construed in the language of 'social innovation'. For Blanco and León (2017  
19  
20 this issue), this term refers to 'practices that seek to satisfy basic human needs  
21  
22 through horizontal cooperative relations between citizens'. Such acts of 'solidarity-  
23  
24 making' not only compensate for the lack or failure of welfare policies in the manner  
25  
26 of neoliberal self-help. They also turn those dispossessed by crisis, including  
27  
28 immigrants, into active political subjects. Politicisation takes ownership of the crisis  
29  
30 by targeting caused by past policies and failed containment strategies. The pillars of  
31  
32 this strategy to reclaim ownership of the crisis could be listed as follows:  
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38 a) Fighting dispossession (such as home repossessions) and enabling 'the satisfaction  
39  
40 of previously alienated human needs' on the basis of alternative modes of economic  
41  
42 conduct, while empowering the excluded/oppressed against the charitable or self-  
43  
44 help ethos and the 'politics of fear' employed by authorities and right extremists  
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46 (Blanco and León, 2017; Arampatzi, 2017 – both this issue);  
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51 b) Empowering those dispossessed by austerity, by challenging dominant cultural  
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53 political economies, such as unbridled consumerism, rugged individualism and  
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55 racism, and challenging alienation; and at the same time, seeking to bring different  
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3 mobilisations together by encouraging them to negotiate ‘differences and political  
4 antagonisms’ (Blanco and León, 2017; Arampatzi, 2017; Watkins, 2017 – all this  
5 issue);  
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11 c) Pushing for a change in the political opportunity structure to create ‘a more  
12 inclusive democratic governance by changing power relations between different  
13 social forces, between the civil society, state and market, and between different  
14 levels of government’ (Blanco and León, 2017 this issue).  
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21 d) Pursuing an active place-making strategy weaving an inter-local/inter-scalar web  
22 of resistance among the dispossessed, tying together ‘local rationalities’ on the basis  
23 of national and global rationalities of solidarity. Solidarity-making ‘from below’  
24 (Arampatzi, 2017 this issue), then, entails a counter-hegemonic place-making  
25 strategy, aiming to territorialise an alternative, performative, socio-economic order.  
26  
27 If successful, this approach bypasses, or at least defers, the insurrectionary approach  
28 to transformation associated with traditional Marxist readings of crisis and  
29 revolution by cultivating flourishing and vitality in everyday urban life.  
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41 Lessons can be drawn from the analysis above. First, contestation is about  
42 values and discourses. Second, it can only ever effectively flourish only with  
43 reference to everyday life, and grows on that ground because the effects of  
44 alienation are felt deeply there. Finally, the success of ‘solidarity-making’ should be  
45 measured by its capacity to transform the masses into organised political agents,  
46 politically educating them around a new social ethics of co-existence such as  
47 Arampatzi’s aspirational “solidarity economy”.  
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### Sustaining Urban Contestation and Resistance?

The constitution of political agency through 'solidarity-making' is a slow process, and the three papers point to two parallel paths that prevent insurgents being co-opted. They may try to foster state-like alternative mechanisms (so as to replace the state, or to develop a model for reform when the time is ripe politically speaking); or, stay in touch with the authorities with the aim of capturing political power when the conditions are ready.

For example, while 'spontaneity and informality' could be seen as '*organisational characteristics of emergent urban solidarity spaces*' (Arampatzi, 2017 this issue) where an alternative logic of (self)-rule/ *public* administration is developed, the key challenge is the capacity of insurgents to institutionalise this 'alternative order'. Yet, it may be that 'the new cannot be born', not only because the elite succeeds in recuperating system antagonists, but also because not every activist has, or wants, a clear strategic blueprint for action (Watkins, 2017 this issue). Their strategies are always in the making and orientations tend to remain informal among those taking an anti-institutional approach (Arampatzi, 2017 this issue).

Informality functions as an obstacle in other ways, too. Arampatzi (2017, this issue) draws our attention to 'uneven power relations' among different initiatives to emphasise the 'limitations of horizontalism'. Some groups gain undue weight in emergent networks of solidarity, such as the recuperation of key elements of the Greek resistance into the now mainstream austerity party, Syriza. In this context, the informal nature of solidarity networks tends to mask hierarchies, which are easier to

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2  
3 recognise in formal politics. Arguably, a comparative categorisation of networks (and  
4  
5 groups) of contestation would be useful from this standpoint.  
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9         What conclusions might we then draw about enhancing the sustainability of  
10 contestation? First, urban scholar-activists must continue systematically to examine  
11 and document the strategies developed in different cases in different geographies in  
12 order to inform others, while discussing how different experiences might translate  
13 into a more general plan for social change. In this sense, critical urban studies must  
14 be a contribution to answering the political question of how ownership of the crisis  
15 can be taken from the right. Relatedly, this involves developing an awareness of the  
16 dangers represented by divisive discourses and reactionary forms of ‘solidarity-  
17 making’, such as the Greek-only food banks of Golden Dawn (Arampatzi, 2017 this  
18 issue). We urgently need to understand what it takes for anti-capitalist  
19 interpretations of the crisis to grip and make sense at the grassroots.  
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35         Second, pursuing an active scalar strategy of representation and organisation  
36 strengthens contestation by establishing ties across insurgents of different  
37 backgrounds and among political actors at various levels. An important benefit of  
38 this strategy is that it increases the technological capacity of resistance, in the  
39 Foucauldian sense. In other words, it facilitates the transfer of know-how to activists  
40 lacking the capacity or the will to institutionalise their movement. Third,  
41 experimenting with combinations of hierarchical and horizontal forms of political  
42 organisation strikes a necessary balance between ‘the formal’ and ‘the informal’. It is  
43 perhaps the right time to consider Matrix style organisations in politics.  
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## Conclusions

The special issue can be read as a contribution to developing a better understanding of how urban crises are constituted, politicised, recuperated and mediated through practices of governance and contestation. We have sought to make legible the multiple ways in which our contributors apply the concept of crisis to cast new light on the contours of austerity urbanism and its antagonists. Table 1 summarises the six main crisis framings and problematics we disclose in the paper. We hope the simple heuristic will be a useful device for urban scholars attempting to develop a better appreciation of the crisis-puzzle we identified at the beginning.

Crisis Framing	Problematic
<b>Structure</b>	Disclosing spatio-temporally determinate contradictions and fault-lines.
<b>Alienation</b>	Containment and crisis-making
<b>Politics</b>	Owning the crisis
<b>Construction</b>	Subjectivity: meaning-making through discourse, logic and identificatory practices.
<b>Boundaries</b>	Delimiting the crisis. Crisis and antonyms: e.g. equilibrium, normality, flourishing, solidarity-making
<b>Indeterminacy</b>	Tipping points: between rupture and recuperation

**Table 1: Urban Crisis Framings and Problematics**

Many of our contributions reinforce the view that, far from provoking fully politicised crises, austere normality reigns. They are imbued with a degree of pessimism far removed from the recent surge in hopes for salvation invested in cities and urban political actors during the upsurge of 2011 (Mason, 2012; Merrifield, 2011). From this perspective, as May intuits, we are witnessing waves of political

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3 and economic crisis, followed by waves of renewed hegemony. However, he also  
4  
5 sees the potential for new waves of upheaval following quickly behind. As we  
6  
7 argued earlier, this pattern suggests that formidable as the neoliberal hegemony  
8  
9 may seem, ruling elites are capable only of returning to or radicalizing governance  
10  
11 strategies they, and we, already know and that new periods of containment may  
12  
13 therefore be fragile. Talk of neoliberal “innovation” is increasingly banal. In this  
14  
15 scenario, the structural perspective identifies a proliferation of ‘morbid symptoms’  
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17 within a ‘catastrophic equilibrium’, suggesting that further tipping points will soon  
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19 arise with indeterminate possibilities and consequences. It depends on who gets to  
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21 own the crisis.  
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27 In the context of the current authoritarian backlash against neoliberal  
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29 globalism, this diagnosis makes it all the more urgent for urban activists to develop  
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31 credible alternatives. The crucial from our studies of contestation are threefold.  
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33 First, scholar activists must interrogate the politics of mobilization to document  
34  
35 them and inform what happens next. A vital task of critical urban studies is to join  
36  
37 the battle to prevent further periods of recuperation and restoration. Part of this  
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39 role is to encourage activists to reflect on failure and be reflexive on the  
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41 containment strategies to which they are subject, as well as on the sources of their  
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43 agency and political power. Second, resistance is much more effective when it scales  
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45 outward and upward. The Spanish case has very important lessons for others in this  
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47 regard about the possibility of replication or emulation. Third, we find that working  
48  
49 “in and against” the state remains an important tactic (if not strategy) for activists  
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51 and that spaces of alienation containment can morph into spaces of breach.  
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53 Relatedly, formal and informal, hierarchical and horizontal modes of contestation  
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3 are inextricably linked. While opting for one approach or the other is a real tactical  
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5 dilemma, at the level of theory and strategy the one rarely exists without the other.  
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9 The special issue also shows that for every generalisation, there are local  
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11 specificities that make subsumptive accounts redundant. Writing on local political  
12  
13 capacities in the face of the global financial crisis, for example, Georgios Terizakis  
14  
15 (2017), shows how the crisis of late capitalist democracies occlude much older crises  
16  
17 of household reproduction. Cities in similar circumstances differ in their responses to  
18  
19 multi-layered crises. Moreover, retrenchment imposed by higher levels of  
20  
21 government do not mean that cities have no choices at all, even if they are not good  
22  
23 ones. Even the Greek 'one-size-fits-all' approach to retrenchment leaves 'windows of  
24  
25 opportunity' for local leaders, employing different arguments and policy styles to  
26  
27 influence – or fail to influence - the legitimacy of austerity in their cities (cf.  
28  
29 Stolzenberg et al. 2016). The space for locally determined action is equally apparent  
30  
31 in the differing governance strategies of cities in Britain, Germany and the US. Such  
32  
33 locality factors make comparative accounts of how variegated urban crises are  
34  
35 made, governed and contested, both interesting and vitally important (Barbehön  
36  
37 and Münch, 2016). This is true even where cities appear weak by comparison with  
38  
39 regional and national actors. Urban political agency and struggles for ownership  
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41 over the meaning of crisis, structurally determined or otherwise, are key  
42  
43 determinants of how tipping points lead respectively to rupture, flourishing or  
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45 recuperation.  
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54 The special issues proceeds in the following order. The first section, with four  
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56 analytical framework papers begins with Weaver's historicization of urban crisis,  
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3 followed by Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu's analysis of alienation, containment and  
4  
5 breach. To end the first section, Barbehön and Münch develop their analysis of  
6  
7 locally distinctive crisis discourses, and Fuller and West focus discuss the  
8  
9 subjectivities and identificatory practices that produce acquiescence to austerity.  
10  
11 The second section consists of two papers on 'governing' the urban crisis. It begins  
12  
13 with Martí-Costa and Tomàs's historical analysis of the Spanish transition from  
14  
15 Francoism, through democratisation and restructuring to austerity and concludes  
16  
17 with Hinkley's analysis of how narratives of fiscal crisis in the US are applied in cities  
18  
19 to render austerity governable. The third section consists of three distinctive papers  
20  
21 exploring the contestation of austerity urbanism. First, Heather Watkins explores  
22  
23 pushback against dominant third-way conceptions of community organising.  
24  
25 Arampatzi then develops her account of solidarity-making amidst the most brutal  
26  
27 forms of crisis and austerity in Athens, complemented thirdly by Blanco and León's  
28  
29 analysis of how innovative neighbourhood solidarities are inter-woven with larger-  
30  
31 scale social movements. Finally, Tim May concludes with critical thoughts about the  
32  
33 subject of the collection, and the means by which the seemingly permanent  
34  
35 oscillation between crises, resistance and recuperation might lead to a more  
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