Reassembling austerity research[*]

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abstract

This paper draws out some of the ambivalences of the bourgeoning work on urban practices of sharing, collaborating and saving and their recent conceptualizations: In political economy accounts of neoliberal urbanism, these practices are seen as a means of coping with – and thereby often reinforcing – larger structural transformations that reproduce urban inequality (Peck, 2012). More agency-oriented approaches highlight their collaborative, political potential to argue that these practices may open up the possibility to shape neoliberal urbanisms in alternative ways (Färber, 2014a). This paper attempts to move beyond such potentially constraining conceptualizations. First, in a theoretical discussion, we attend to both lines of thinking and seek to critically acknowledge their traps and constraints. Second, we relate low budget practices to concerns about poverty. Our theoretical approach and the introduction of practices that could be better described as no budget practices allow us to question some of the assumptions that are underlying the emerging discourse on how to best conceptualize such responses to scarcity. In conclusion, we call for a closer scrutiny of the empirical realities and contexts within which low budget practices are embedded in order to avoid the possible trap of exaggerating or ignoring their effects.

Introduction

Austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012; Tonkiss, 2013) has provoked considerable debate in urban scholarship. If a good part of austerity research has focused on explaining and critiquing the larger structural transformations producing the current conjuncture (Peck, 2012; Mayer, 2012), recent interest has turned to the ways in which people cope with resulting constraints in everyday practice

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through collective low budget organizing. Färber, for instance, conceptualizes these 'ways in which [...] people relate to one another in established and newly emerging low budget practices, and in situations of austerity' (2014a: 120) with the notion of low budget urbanity (henceforth LBU)[1]. Although not always explicitly labeled LBU and sometimes distanced from its conceptual ideas (Bialski et al., 2014; Rosol and Schweizer, 2012; Ferrell, 2006; Shantz, 2005), this programmatic account is based on a series of studies that have explored a variety of small-scale, quotidian, and entrepreneurial or community driven forms of engagement with a view to understand how these may work to bypass or reconfigure dominant global trends (Krätke, 2011; Stahl, 2013; Müller et al., 2008; Rapp, 2009)[2]. Scholars have identified an inventory of strategies that are seen to creatively make more with less and cushion the cutting back of public provision, services and responsibilities: Urban gardening initiatives provide a frequent example to inquire whether a generation of gardeners is currently planting a better society (Halder and von der Haide, 2010; Rosol, 2010). Scholars study dumpster diving as 'anarchist political praxis' (Shantz, 2005) that promises implicit emancipatory potential (Ferrell, 2006). In a similar vein, authors point to a culture of (informal) co-working as well as to second-hand cultures and alternative trading spaces (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Hughes, 2005) as new sites of commoning (Baier et al., 2013).

To revisit a concept-in-the-making, we embed the discussion around these practices within a recent controversy about the ontologies that frame urban studies: The interest in these practices emerged, in our view, against the backdrop of a debate around urban austerity driven by political economy. In the context of this literature, strategies of sharing and saving, as well as other means of coping with austerity are seen as the most recent indication of the seemingly unavoidable results of neoliberal rule (Mayer, 2012). According to this position, these practices risk to mimetically embrace the restraints of neoliberal policies. In contrast to these assumptions, this special issue stresses solidarity and new forms of urban cooperation in an attempt to move beyond the predefined trajectories of political economy approaches. Here, forms of low budget engagement do not merely feature as a new form of organization or the symbol of precarious living conditions. As solidary and co-operative forms of production and consumption, they are seen to invoke the emergence of an alternative that

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1   As LBU is a relatively young research programme and Färber's article constitutes its most comprehensive conceptual framing to date, our intervention relies both on her paper as well as on our own review of this discourse.

2   We draw on low budget practices as one set of sharing and saving practices to represent – *pars pro toto* – a whole discourse of collaborative practices that are discussed in this special issue.

may lead a way out of the political constraints of austerity and neoliberal modes of production (Rosol and Schweizer, 2012; Pacione, 1997).

Although such practices may, in fact, produce a number of often surprisingly successful strategies of resilience, such coping under an 'extreme economy' (Peck, 2012) should not be examined uncritically. The issue addressed in this paper is threefold: Firstly, we formulate a methodological concern with the ways in which both approaches theorize urban practices associated with low budgets and their workings in contemporary urbanization under austerity. By critically interrogating the limitations and applications of these existing framings we argue that an *a priori* understanding of low budget practices as either an indication of the roll-out of neoliberal rule and/or as a contingent assemblage replete with emerging possibilities hampers the study of these practices. To be clear, we do not take issue with either of the concepts as such. Rather we suggest that an open exploration of these practices should neither presuppose that they 'save the city' (as the title of this special issue suggests) nor that they are ineffective in dealing with urban inequalities.

Secondly, we argue that an open-ended investigation into responses to scarcity necessitates widening the boundaries of this research programme. If its central concern is to study new forms of (low) budget organizing, we point to the silence on poverty – that one would assume was a central concern of this perspective – as an apparent shortcoming of this agenda. Although it is acknowledged that some forms of coping on a low budget are occurring out of necessity and point to a lack of material means and an imposed abstinence (Bude et al., 2011; Bialski et al., 2013), much of the literature is concerned with forms of voluntary restraint and its moral and communitarian value (Doherty and Etzioni, 2003; Putnam, 2000). We argue that accounting for the practices of those most disadvantaged by the economy adds to an understanding of everyday urban practices on low budgets. Poverty and no budget[3] practices provide a powerful starting point to call into question some of the underlying assumptions of solidarity and emancipation on the one hand and co-optation and consolidation on the other that are presupposed in this discourse.

Thirdly, we suggest a reading that allows for a critical exposition of the ways in which 'existing urban realities support oppressive and exclusionary social structures and practices while at the same time projecting alternative visions' (Cunningham, 2010: 268f). In the light of ongoing privatizations, a growing

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3   The difference between low budget practices and no budget practices lies not so much in the size of the budgets; neither is it a difference of practices but rather of motivations: no budget practices are based more on necessity than on choice.

sense for entrepreneurialism, as well as the continuing rolling back of welfare, emerging practices of sharing and saving may present instances of complicity with neoliberalism. Yet, if we seek to make room for the possibilities these practices may offer we have to examine their specific effects and engage in more detail with their possibly contradictory outcomes.

This argument is structured in three steps. Section one sets the scene. It contrasts both theoretical framings sketched out above and discusses the constraints of these approaches for studying low-budget practices. We go on to suggest that opening up these framings through the inclusion of practices that emerge out of poverty would allow for a more holistic research programme. In section three, we conclude with our own suggestions for studying responses to austerity which, we hope, will make room for attending to their (possibly) transformative potentials as well as to wider structural transformations.

Theoretical framing: Constraints or possibilities?

Our first concern in this paper is a methodological one. As the constraints of austerity have become an omnipresent discourse in (the study of) neoliberal urbanism, much research has sought to uncover the implications of neoliberalism from a political economy perspective (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). If the strategies to overcome scarcity, featured for instance in this special issue, flag up an opening for possibilities and change, the lens through which they are studied similarly constitutes an attempt to leave the well-trodden path of structural constraints with their restricted leeway for thinking contingency and transformation (Rosskamm, 2014: 132). In scrutinizing how current research approaches frame everyday practices of saving the city we aim to uncover the constraints of these two dominant approaches. Both theoretical framings, we argue, run danger to preclude an open exploration of the practices in question.

To understand this backdrop we briefly return to some of the core arguments of this work: In a recent paper, Peck (2012: 629) describes austerity urbanism as a contested political project that 'transforms the political calculus for all involved'. In the current conjuncture, it comprises three interrelated processes: destructive creativity, deficit politics and devolved risk. Firstly, austerity conditions intensify creative destruction, as saving measures (or cuts) further attack especially those facilities and mechanisms that work towards a more progressive (and yet somewhat Keynesian) market logic, i.e. redistribution. Rather than resulting in a 'spontaneous emergence of deregulated or free markets' (*ibid.*: 631), for Peck such measures intrude further into the remnants of redistributive welfare statism. This leads to more – rather than less – and qualitatively different state

action and represents neoliberal practice performed through privatization and voluntarism. Secondly, deficit politics present the context within which especially those policy areas can easily be abandoned that traditionally have attempted to offset the most blatant effects of inequality (such as unemployment benefits). As such, these measures target those who are already stretched and strained, let alone those who have only recently been affected by the crisis. Deficit politics deepen austerity rather than balancing its unevenness (Slater, 2014). Thirdly, both the austerity measures supposedly responding to the crisis and the responsibility for bolstering their worst effects are devolved and downloaded onto local authorities and, in succession, to individuals. Peck (2012: 632) argues that 'austerity is ultimately about making *others* pay the price of fiscal retrenchment'. These *others*, in his line of thinking, are those inventing and enacting practices with low and – *in extenso* – no budgets. From this perspective, low budget practices present a response to austerity that neatly fits into the neoliberal repertoire of shifting responsibilities downwards, devolving the costs of austerity to lower scales (regions, cities and neighbourhoods) and expanding a punitive law-and-order state onto those most affected by the resulting constraints (Peck and Theodore, 2012; Smith, 1996)[4].

Beyond Peck's more theoretical stance, local reactions (of community involvement) to the rolling back of welfare and the rolling out of an enabling, workfarist state have been drawn out in detail (cf. Mayer, 2013; Rosol, 2012; 2006; MacLeavy, 2009). A series of studies has noted how self-organized and participatory practices lead either to more formalized arrangements or to islands of potentially progressive projects that remain more or less temporal and local without necessarily engaging with larger issues around injustice or inequality (cf. Mayer, 2011). In the strong version of this argument, for instance put forward by Mayer, even those practices that 'might appear as the fulfillment of earlier grassroots empowerment claims [are] actually part of a new mode of governance that has emerged in and for neglected and disadvantaged areas and communities' (2003: 110). On a similar note, Colomb has noted that temporary uses and urban underground cultures have been promoted, officially institutionalized and integrated into urban growth strategies (2012: 140; see also Groth and Corijn, 2005; Rapp, 2009). Rosol and Schweizer (2012: 713) advance this more nuanced version of the argument: They discuss to what extent urban gardening projects 'based on principles of Solidarity Economics are in a position to develop new economic forms based on solidarity'. Their conclusion is ambivalent. Rosol and Schweizer find that 'neo-liberal policies are presented

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4   Wacquant's (2007a, 2007b) studies of 'advanced marginality' and the lives of 'urban outcasts' offer analytical and ethnographic accounts of how austerity works from a political economy perspective.

almost worldwide and without alternative' and that 'it is not possible for ortoloco [a 'community-supported agriculture' project] to carry out its activities entirely outside the complexities of the global economy or the capitalistic pressures that distort its activities' (*ibid.*: 721). Yet they also suggest that projects of co-working, co-organizing, saving and sharing 'continually stretch the borders of the possible' (*ibid.*).

While we cannot possibly do justice to the variations and complexity of this work, framing low budget practices through a meta-narrative of structural constraints declares *avant la lettre* that these practices tend to consolidate the workings of austerity. How can we attend to their possibilities if we denounce *a priori* that low budget practices could in fact foster more democratic practices? And who are we as researchers to assume to be able to predict the long-term effects of self-made, low budget, collectively organized practices? While an awareness of the tensions and contradictions of neoliberal rule does not necessarily preclude an account of progressive imaginaries and openings within macro-political constraints, political economy approaches tend to stress the risk of cooptation and normative charge (cf. Mayer, 2003). In other words, the political economy assumption of a coherent political project with clear outcomes could be seen to presuppose the hopelessness of these emerging initiatives.

It is against this backdrop that the current special issue suggests to supplement the previously described politico-economic framing with an understanding of how these practices come to matter as emergent formations, practices, objects, discourses and histories. While no overarching conceptual frame unites low budget studies, this work is coherent in the (sometimes unarticulated) attempt to refine the structural politico-economic explanations by considering moments of agency, actor-networks and sociomaterialities involved in contemporary formations. Consequently, this approach to theorizing 'from within' differs from the epistemological approaches political economy perspectives offer in a number of ways.

Firstly, if political economy perspectives tend to frame even critical and/or subversive responses to neoliberal urbanization in terms of co-optation, they already predetermine the directionality of such practices through the (neoliberal) conditions within which they emerge. As such conceptualizations leave little (or no) room for more variable or alternative developments, research on low budget practices tends to start from an implicit dissatisfaction with the difficulty to theorize moments of agency and resistance and their various articulations (McRobbie, 2012; Färber, 2014a). According to Färber, 'agencies must be taken into account as taking their effect in parallel with austerity measures, and only occasionally in relation to them' (2014a: 133). Studying these agencies is often

guided by a practice-approach, which stresses the sayings and doings of agents and actants, rather than structures. Bialski, for instance, studies how online social networks such as 'Couchsurfing' have led to the emergence of informal, collaborative, grassroots travel practices, yet also discusses the exclusions these practices (can) produce (2012; 2013).

Studying emergent practices 'from within' allows for a shift of perspective to the contingencies and disruptions within the workings of neoliberal urbanization. This shift results secondly in a search for responses to austerity, particularly on the local level and from the bottom up. Thus differing from political economy approaches that focus on the macro, the local dimension offers research on low budget practices possibilities to chart moments of agency. Pacione's (1997) study of local (and alternative) currencies is a case in point.

Thirdly, a good part of low budget research stands out for paying attention to socio-material formations and, in line with actor-network-theory, for attributing agency to these objects, or actants. Färber, for instance, has recently suggested theorizing low budget urbanism as assemblages to account for the ways in which discursive and material practices continuously compose urban constellations (2014a; see also Ureta, 2014; Shore and Wright, 2011).

Fourthly, we note a bias for potentials that are found in punctual interventions in the urban constellations and are seen to leave traces that may lead to long time change. In line with the austerity debate, research on low budget organizing tends to be framed within the context of economic crises. Yet it comes to different conclusions about the nature of urban transformations than more structuralist perspectives. Rather than perceiving global formations as hindering individual agency, this approach tends to focus on the arrangements and possibilities within and despite these constraints. This perspective can involve a tendency to conceptualize assumed potentials from a normative, rather than analytical, perspective, where they are implicitly valued in advance as desirable and positive. Urry, for instance, discusses how people 'develop personalized life projects through being freed from certain structures, [...] extend and elaborate their consumption patterns and social networks' (2011: 213).

In sum, these assumptions allow low budget thinkers to overcome some of the constraints of political economy frameworks. Yet, this approach to studying (low budget) practices and forms of organization 'from within' comes with its own problematic baggage: On the one hand, studying assemblages 'from within' is in itself an inconsistent endeavor. The framing of this research posits austerity as a pre-given and fixed context. This contradicts a reading of such practices as assemblages, in which formations are continuously reconstructed, emerging and

contingent. Rejecting structural perspectives is not, as Tonkiss helpfully remarks, 'to say that forms of social and economic organization [...] are not structured in ways that are reproduced and embed power in quite stable or systematic modes' (2011: 587). Where agency and practice are studied from within, the context within which these may emerge and materialize is implied, even if it is not explicitly subject of the analysis. On the other hand, the assumed 'openness' of this approach is closed down from the beginning, when the aim of the project is predefined as one that primarily 'lends a voice to the potentialities' (Färber 2014a: 122). A full analysis of those matters that are of concern in research on responses to austerity must include practices that are less promising. This brings us to the second part of our paper, which is about the choice of what matters as a 'matter of concern'[5] (Latour, 2004).

Learning from no budget practices

A necessary methodological premise of agency-centered perspectives is that the researcher has to question the selection and classification of her material at any moment (Kamleithner, 2014: 118). What relations one actually follows, Kamleithner suggests, depends on the political consciousness of the researcher and thus necessarily builds on normative assumptions. Clearly, any research interest needs to define a field and a direction: The current research into low budget practices focuses on alternative, collective and cooperative projects and the ways in which they organize 'the city in parallel and/or in contrast to centralized, state-based infrastructure' (Bialski et al., 2013). Our second concern in this paper is to examine a specific spectrum of the low-budget practices that have so far been omitted from the framework: If research into practices based on low budgets – unspecified as to whether financial, social or symbolic budgets are at stake – examines only practices defined through the quality of their relations (namely solidary ones), it excludes those practices that have emerged from dire need, for instance, in the context of benefit reductions and very low paying labor. Poverty, however, matters to the study of low budget practices and thus this research programme. Why are bottle collecting, temp-work, street vending, low or unpaid academic work not looked at when researching culturally meaningful socio-material formations that articulate urban economic crises in terms of low budget practices? Priming the research on low budget practices with those practices that we labeled no budget practices not only widens the focus of this

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5   Latour takes issue with the construction of matters of fact and argues for a realist stance towards matters of concern. Pun intended, 'matters of concern' are not only those things that are (or should be) of concern for research, but also concerning in the sense that they are (or should be) bothering or disturbing the researcher as well as the reader (Latour, 2004).

programme. It also invites us to question some of the assumptions underlying the emerging discourse around LBU as well as to rethink the effects of these practices. To trigger this reconsideration, the remainder of this part draws out some of the similarities and differences of the related conceptualizations of low and no budget practices.

First, and most centrally, the notion of no budget practices (like their low budget counterparts) captures efforts to sustain or replace initiatives or projects that fell victim to social policy cuts and fiscal constraints. Both related sets of practices thus clearly emerge out of scarcity; yet where low budget practices occur either out of necessity or choice, no budget practices ensue out of necessity. In some of the literature, saving, sharing and low budget practices are explored as an ethical alternative to neoliberal capitalism (Rosol and Schweizer, 2012: 713; Tonkiss, 2013). Based on solidarity and collective organizing, rather than competition, low-budget initiatives are assumed to provide, as McRobbie suggests, 'a pathway for local growth, meaningful non-standard jobs and a merging of craft with ethical and sustainable practice' (2012: 1). They have led others to conclude that sharing and saving practices present 'living proof that other ways of thinking and acting are possible' (Rosol and Schweizer, 2012: 713). Yet, the somewhat premature focus on solidarity and especially its moral elevation to a potential 'savior' of the city (posited in this special issue) limit this research programme to a set of practices that could simply be called voluntary activities, civic engagement, participation, solidarity economies, communitarianism or activism. The inclusion of activities that work to supplement budgets at the very bottom of the economy has an analytical payoff in that it allows asking open questions about the motivations, cultural meanings and effects of low budget practices in people's everyday lives. And it permits to meaningfully engage with the implications of findings: As low budget practices may not only be about saving and sharing, but also about surviving, the presumption that low budget practices promise potentials or produce solidarity may be premature.

Second, where low budget projects manage to thrive despite or even because of the burdens implied by improvisation and self-provisioning, they often require high levels of input from their members, users or activists. The term 'low budget practices' captures essentially a reality of smaller means, yet the relational qualifier 'low' remains as ill defined as the apparently economic understanding of 'budget'. In contrast to no budget practices that often require little prior knowledge or capacities, the skills and voluntary input of often educated, but low- or unpaid participants in activities framed as low budget practices can arguably amount to relatively large 'budgets'. 'Budgets' or 'costs', in our understanding, refer to related aspects: the social and cultural precondition of engaging in communal practices on the one hand and the actual enactment of unpaid labor

on the other (cf. Bourdieu 1983; Mayer 2003). Measured in purely capital-oriented terms both points would be associated with high monetary costs. This is not to say that no budget practices do not involve skillful organization; our point is that the educational, social, political or other means that are necessary for enacting low budget practices need further conceptualization. The current lack of clarity leads to an analytical problem: the focus on low budget practices dissociates poverty from what matters as concern. Where the organization of basic goods or the realization of a less deprived lifestyle may be paramount, coping may appear as an individualized fight for scarce resources. The inclusion of no budget practices into the research agenda could trigger a discussion of the various (social and other) forms of capitals invested into sharing and saving practices as well as their manifestations and effects.

Third, both sets of practices and their articulations differ in terms of their self-perception and perceptions by others. At times, low budget practices tend to work with a particular 'cool' aesthetics of informality, which could easily be associated with ingenuity, resourcefulness and entrepreneurial flexibility. These virtues are not merely mapped onto real life practices by hopeful academics. They equally derive from the self-presentations and self-publications of some of these projects, which 'strive to distinguish themselves, or explicitly distance themselves, from the capitalist way of organizing the economy' (Rosol and Schweizer, 2012: 714). Consider, for instance, the representations of gardening initiatives, which tend to stress their innovative ways of harvesting gains beyond economic calculations through a kind of rough but caring look. But the informal aesthetics of self-organized initiatives can also work to market such projects or allow them to capitalize upon this style. No budget practices come with imaginaries of a different kind: Representations of self-built housing, for instance in the recent media coverage of the (no budget) dwelling practices in a vacant plot in Berlin-Kreuzberg, the Cuvrybrache, soon led to labeling this place 'the slum of Berlin', stigmatizing both the site and its inhabitants. To consider the representation of such no budget practices within a research programme on responses to austerity not only allows questioning the assumptions and expectations through which these practices are framed. It also facilitates a distinction between the worldly effects of practices of sharing and saving and their cultural representations and thus provides a crucial corrective to research into low budget practice as currently undertaken.

Whilst agreeing that practices such as car-sharing or urban gardening might in fact 'produce new forms of value' (Bialski et al., 2013: 2), the additional analytical dimension of no budget perspectives could help making sense of 'the relation of these practices to capital, the state, and citizen responsibilities' (*ibid.*) when the

consequences of austerity policies force more and more people to complement their benefits by diving through bins.

Beyond constraints or possibilities: Studying practices under austerity

Following our three concerns with the current framing of low budget practices our suggestion is to study sharing and saving practices in the light of these shortcomings, yet without falling back into the equally constraining structural(ist) logic. To recap, we argued that framing these practices through more structural approaches runs danger of closing down any potential for alternatives. At the same time, we suggested that the current framing of low budget practices 'from within' reduces its conceptual openness to a narrow focus on possibilities and potentials. In closing, we attempt to reconcile these positions with a conceptual approach to low-budget practices that goes beyond their simple denunciation whilst attending to the constraints of the contemporary conjuncture:

Recent conceptual work on neoliberal governance that is more attentive to the ambiguities of political programmes, the permeability of governmental strategies and the uncertainty of the contemporary conjuncture may help to move beyond a one-sided critique of low budget practices. In a series of accounts, John Clarke has offered a notion of governance that departs from the assumption of a coherent political project with clear-cut outcomes in practice (2005; 2012; see also Newman and Clarke, 2009). He reminds us that '[i]n analysing … ideological schemes or governmental strategies, we need not to mistake the fantastic projections of those who would rule for their real effects' (Clarke, 2012: 209). Instead, he calls for a more differentiated analysis of the emergent organizational forms, diverse forces and unreliable agents that influence governance in the contentious landscapes of the city where the intended effects of politics rarely materialize in foreseeable ways.

These arguments echo recent criticisms of conventional understandings of neoliberalism made by Barnett (2010), Ferguson (2007; 2011) and others. These authors suggest that critical theories of neoliberalism, which denounce the potential possibilities inherent within the neoliberal project as necessarily leading to a reproduction or increase of urban inequality, may be premature. Not only, as Barnett (2012) suggests, may these 'deterministic' perspectives exaggerate the constraints of local actors through broader economic forces. They also remind us that co-optation, activation and the like might not be the most important issues at stake, when alternative or experimental activities manage to reconfigure urban polices within or through these constraining conditions. As Ferguson notes,

'some emergent political initiatives that appear at first blush to be worryingly neoliberal may, on closer inspection, amount to something a good deal more hopeful' (2011: 67). In this line of reasoning, and crucially for a discussion of low budget practices, it hardly matters that projects are embedded in or complicit with a politics of 'activation, empowerment, responsibilization and abandonment' (Clarke, 2005). What does matter, however, is that they challenge this conjunction and its inherent injustices.

In sum, these arguments invite us to move beyond the more deductive approaches of political economy perspectives and the more inductive approaches of agency-oriented perspectives. We therefore suggest following a more transductive approach that not only leaves behind the dualist either/or of possibilities or constraints, but also attempts to remain focused on concrete contexts and actual practices. Our paper concludes with two broader suggestions for researching no or low budget practices.

Firstly, we suggest that the local policy responses and programmes within which specific practices are embedded require close scrutiny. We are inspired here by Tonkiss' (2013) powerful argument for the importance of attending to policy contexts. By arguing that the effects of practices of sharing and saving depend on the specific policy frameworks within which they emerge, Tonkiss relates various bottom-up to top-down practices and engages with the political and social implications of both emerging practices and policies: While paying attention to the interstices in which alternative urbanisms are tested and tried, she equally explores the policy arrangements that variably promote or disrupt such civic activities. In this line of thinking, co-optation 'is not simply a danger spotted by sharp-eyed and disabused social critics; it is a condition of the work these practitioners [people involved in urban interventions discussed in Tonkiss' article] do if they want to make space' (Tonkiss, 2013: 323). These points suggest that research into low budget practices needs to directly relate to the policy responses. What practices are promoted and which are suppressed? To what ends?

Secondly, considering calls to post-colonize the production of knowledge and to 'terminate easy claims to theorising on the basis of a small selection of wealthier cities' (Robinson, 2011: 4), we suggest that the research agenda would benefit from including non-Western contexts. If the current debate on low budget practices has largely focused on high-income countries, widening this discourse to include urban practices from the so-called Global South brings us yet again to the question of poverty. A more global research programme would point to the crucial fact that some of the practices that in the present discourse on low budgets are seen to be producing solidarity are perhaps better described as

survival strategies that help to overcome economic uncertainty (Southworth, 2006). Or they are the very ordinary ways in which large parts of the world population organize their everyday lives. In other words, while describing the newly emerging low budget practices is an inherently important part of the research agenda, so is a contextualization of how these practices come to matter and whether they are based on choice or necessity.

Conclusion

The framework of studying low budget practices is currently positioned within a two-sided political/discursive field, the two poles of which are an uncritical celebration of its practices and effects on the one hand and the (equally uncritical) denunciation of its constraints on the other. The aim of this paper was to suggest that sharing and saving practices should be discussed more openly. To this end, we introduced two key theoretical approaches relevant to research on low budget practices. Firstly, we referred to a discussion of austerity framed through its political economy and understood not only as a condition but also as a neoliberal governance programme of cuts and enclosures. We suggested that relying on this discourse alone may lead to overlooking actual potentialities of these practices. Here, we agree with Chatterton that, '[l]ike an Alice in Wonderland who has found herself in the city, we need to dream six impossible cities before breakfast' (2010: 235). Such an 'urban impossible', a city yet to come (Simone, 2004), requires a 'wider political imaginary to intervene in the unfolding story of the city and calls for a radical appetite for change to inform the work of urban researchers' (Chatterton, 2010: 234). A necessity for change amounts to no less than the responsibility to attend to the potentials presented by engaging proactively with more solidary practices. Austerity research needs to make room for the possibilities that may emerge from studying sharing and saving practices and yet continue to resist co-optation, especially with ecological and social injustices in mind. Secondly, we addressed the framing of low budget practices as agency-oriented and assemblage-related in order to draw out some of the problematic assumptions underlying this emerging research focus. In particular, we stressed the broken promise of openness and argued that the focus on potentialities presents, in fact, a conceptual closure.

To unbolt the limited focus on low budget practices, we introduced no budget practices as an additional analytical perspective and as a way to address a central constraint of current research into low budget practices, namely its missing engagement with poverty. This omission raised three concerns: firstly, this research focuses somewhat prematurely on potentials and solidarity. As we demonstrated, sharing and saving practices are central features of poverty.

Secondly, low budget practices need to be confronted with their wider and potentially hidden costs. This includes a consideration of the motivations that inform sharing and saving practices. Thirdly, both (self-)perception and (self-)representation of low budget projects demand a critical distance towards the normative assumptions that are underlying their practices to distinguish more forcefully between the desired and actual effects of sharing and saving practices.

In conclusion, we discussed how to restrain from taking the complicity of low budget practices in reproducing austerity as a given and from exaggerating their potential. We offered two suggestions for researching urban everyday practices that arose from this debate. These were, firstly, the need to be more attentive to the policy context in which emerging and changing practices are embedded in order to identify the frameworks in which low budget practices can cause effective change (see Tonkiss, 2013). Secondly, we suggested that it would be useful to include studies of low budget practices in non Western contexts into the research programme in order to discuss these practices through a more historically and geographically informed perspective. We agree with Schafran (2014: 328) that as 'urbanists [we] need to make peace with our modernist impulses, and work collectively to develop a paramodern sensibility'. Given the ambiguous workings of sharing and saving practices *vis-à-vis* austerity policies this sensibility is particularly urgent.

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