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# **Austerity, the state and common sense in Europe: A comparative perspective on Italy and Portugal**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we examine the making of austerity as common sense, located at the intersection of state interventions and the everyday practices and moral logics through which austerity emerges as an acceptable livelihood possibility for individuals, households and communities. Our argument is based on the comparative analysis of austerity in Italy and Portugal, with a focus on popular austerities among working-class households in two post-industrial towns. With the aim of addressing the conundrum of the pervasiveness of austerity, we emphasize the relevance of Gramsci's notion of common sense to expand the anthropological theorization of austerity as a hegemonic project combining coercion and consent, capable of reconfiguring the state, and as a field of contradictions endemic to the very making of common sense. We argue that austerity regimes become operative through the deployment of institutional coercive practices, moral arguments and the ideological co-optation of historical legacies of austerity embodied by ordinary people in their livelihood praxis.

## **Keywords**

Austerity, common sense, Europe, Gramsci, hegemony, sacrifice, the state

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### **Introduction: Anthropology, austerity and common sense**

In this article, we examine the making of austerity as common sense, located at the intersection of state interventions and the everyday practices and moral logics through which austerity emerges as an acceptable livelihood possibility for individuals, households and communities. We emphasize the relevance of Gramsci's notion of common sense<sup>1</sup> to expand the theorization of austerity as a hegemonic project combining coercion and consent, capable of reconfiguring the state, and as a field of contradictions integral to the very making of common sense. The notion of common sense may be briefly understood as the fragmentary, taken-for-granted understandings, common beliefs and ideas through which people perceive and act on the world around them (Gramsci, 1975: 75–76; 1396–1401; Crehan, 2011; 2016: 43–58; Liguori, 2009; Thomas, 2009: 372–374). The concept of common sense encompasses the stable given-ness of social life and its ongoing contradictory, contested and negotiated character, as well as the stratified coexistence of old and new conceptions of the world – ‘a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions [...] in which one can find whatever one likes’ (Gramsci, 1975: 1399).<sup>2</sup> We are interested in the implicitness, the everyday, taken-for-granted status that makes common sense the malleable ground upon which hegemony and power relations are reproduced – as well as in the incoherence and contradictory character which renders common sense, at any given historical moment, a ‘material force’ mobilized to support potentially different political and economic projects (Crehan, 2016; Hall, 1988; Swanson, 2008; Watkins, 2011).

Following the 2008 financial crash, transnational institutions of governance (e.g. the International Monetary Fund [IMF] and the European Union [EU]) and several nation-

states, on both sides of the Atlantic, settled on the theory of ‘expansionary fiscal contraction’ (i.e. austerity) as their primary macroeconomic and social policy orientation towards economic recovery (Blyth, 2013). Austerity was favoured on the grounds of two central claims, verging on ‘magical thinking’ (Clarke and Newman, 2012). The first posited that, during periods of economic recession, governments should concentrate on fiscal consolidation through extensive budget cuts; and the second that this action would simultaneously revive ‘business confidence’. Contrary to the claims that such policies would prove beneficial to the general well-being, across Europe, particularly in the indebted southern European periphery, structural adjustment programmes sponsored by the Troika<sup>3</sup> and centred on measures of ‘internal devaluation’ (i.e. harsh tax increases, spending cuts, reduction of welfare benefits and wage repression) resulted in a severe crisis of well-being and social reproduction, illustrated by growing labour insecurity, economic hardship, food poverty, rising unemployment and increasing welfare dispossession and citizenship destitution. This article addresses the conundrum of the pervasiveness of austerity through a set of interrelated questions: How can we explain the resilience and persistence of an economic paradigm that is unable to bring about the economic growth it promises? What is it that makes austerity acceptable and plausible? In this process, what is the role of the state, and how can we account for people’s interventions in the making of austerity as common sense?

In what follows, we argue that the pervasive hegemonic quality of austerity is best captured by addressing the making of austerity as common sense. By referring to austerity as common sense we are pointing to its capacity to disseminate itself in ‘the most widespread conception of life and morals’ (Gramsci, 1975: 76), that is its ability to enter – paraphrasing Hall’s remarks on Thatcherism – ‘as a material and ideological force into the daily lives of ordinary people’ (Hall, 1988: 6). In contrast to arguments centred on the

intensifying coercive dimension of austerity, or the emergence of a post-consent age of politics (Bhattacharyya, 2015: 19), we suggest that the pervasive and resilient character of austerity is dependent on its ability to articulate and maintain varying degrees of consent from those submitted to its imperatives. We argue that austerity regimes become operational through the deployment of institutional coercive practices, moral arguments and the ideological co-optation of historical legacies of austerity embodied by ordinary people in their livelihood praxis.

Following Gramsci, we think of the state as a relational complexity through which ‘the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules’ (Gramsci, 1971: 244). Philip Abrams (1988: 77) made the important point that the state is ‘in every sense of the term a triumph of concealment’, whose greatest hegemonic force consists in concealing its methods of dominance and subjection while accomplishing the legitimation of the illegitimate. Building upon Abrams’ argument, we argue that approaching austerity as common sense enables us to capture the significant, but often elusive role played by nation-states as privileged ideological mediators and material translators of local austerity regimes. Inspired by Gramsci, we locate this dynamic of ideological concealment in the sphere of common sense, which we analyse as the concrete ground of legitimation, negotiation and contestation of austerity regimes.

Anthropology has thus far produced relevant insights into the theorization of austerity, focusing on its underlying historical dynamics, its disenfranchising effects in relation to people’s livelihood, and its impact on collective modalities of resistance and protest (e.g. Bear, 2015; Bear and Knight, 2017; Knight, 2015; Knight and Stewart, 2016; Muehlebach, 2016; Powers and Rakopoulos, 2019; Rakopoulos, 2018; Raudon and Shore, 2018). The literature tends to be shaped, implicitly or explicitly, by a dual understanding

vis-à-vis the discontinuous character of current austerity policies or their macroeconomic linkages with a longer and broader history of structural adjustment programmes emanating from the IMF or the World Bank. On the one hand, austerity is defined as constituting a break and rupture, a ‘dynamics of reversal’ in ‘societies or individuals that formerly enjoyed a higher standard of consumption [and] must now make do with less’ (Knight and Stewart, 2016: 2). According to this perspective, austerity policies implemented in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, as in the case of southern Europe, have profoundly impacted upon people’s temporal consciousness, that is, both their capacities to fulfil present material needs and the means by which they project themselves into the future as worthy subjects. On the other hand, the current austerity moment is addressed as an instantiation of a broader history and genealogy of structural adjustment programmes within and beyond Europe, where the neoclassical economic principle of scarcity is continuously re-deployed as a normative framework in the moral and social regulation of individuals, communities and countries (Powers and Rakopoulos, 2019). The analysis developed in this article, focused on the making of austerity as common sense, contributes to the literature described by proposing a middle-ground approach to the theorization of austerity. This middle-ground approach focuses on the historically provincial and contingent dimensions of austerity regimes, tracing their potential hegemonic underpinnings in the ideological work performed by nation-states in the local translation of austerity policies, and in the activation of historical legacies of popular forms of austerity.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section, we address how, in Portugal and Italy, austerity was re-signified by a series of state interventions framed by the ideas of opportunity and exceptionality. The ideas of opportunity and exceptionality acquired popular traction through the mobilization of a moral grammar of justification, grounded on common-sense elements. This enabled national governments to pursue and accelerate

ongoing processes of neoliberal state restructuring, while concealing the political and ideological foundations of particular policies intervening in the institutional logics of welfare redistribution. This is followed by an examination of what we designate as the ideology of sacrifice, which consists of a collective and recognizable framework of morality and responsibility. We argue that the deployment of the ideology of sacrifice by governmental political agents and economic elites enabled them to frame the meanings and imperatives of austerity as embedded in practices, ideas and conceptions about scarcity, livelihoods and morality. We suggest that it is because the ideology of sacrifice enables the re-working of the meaning of contemporary forms of austerity to resonate with popular conceptions of austerity arising from past experience, that it is able to act as a material hegemonic force.

We build our argument by combining historical analysis of the unfolding of national ideologies of sacrifice with empirical analysis of livelihood practices and moral discourses of sacrifice – what we designate ‘popular austerities’ – among working-class households in two mid-size towns in Italy and Portugal. We draw from ethnographic research in Brindisi (Italy) and Setúbal (Portugal).<sup>4</sup> These two cities of – respectively – 88,000 and 110,000 inhabitants, shared similar trajectories of heavy industrialization in the 1960s and massive industrial restructuring and downsizing from the 1980s onwards. Nevertheless, they differ in their position within their respective national geographies: whereas Brindisi is a provincial city of the Italian South, Setúbal is a peripheral urban area integrated in the metropolitan region of greater Lisbon. Such differences are broadly exemplary of the different territorial relations in the two countries: highly centralized in the Portuguese case; relatively polycentric in the Italian case, within a general dualism between the richer Centre-North and the more impoverished South.

## **Austerity as acceleration: Opportunity and exceptionality**

In Portugal and Italy, the campaign to create a new national common sense of acceptance of austerity policies was framed by the morally embedded pairing of promises of the opportunity to improve national politics with ideas of the exceptionality of the national emergency. Austerity was re-signified as the opportunity to remake the form, functions and role of the state, making it more efficient and fairer with regard to the distribution and allocation of public resources (Mikuš, 2016). The virtues of rational and technocratic expertise (Stubbs and Zitko, 2018) served the purpose of reinforcing the acceleration of neoliberal state restructuring processes as being both legitimate and necessary. The exceptionality of the moment concealed the existence of domestic political and ideological agendas underpinning states' actions and interventions. In this process, the state apparatuses played a crucial role in translating austerity into the language of sacrifice and necessity, along the path of long-standing debates on failed collective projects of equality and incomplete modernization.

In Portugal, the development of a modern welfare state only took place following the Carnation Revolution of 1974 – a left-wing military coup which put an end to the oldest dictatorship in twentieth-century Western Europe. The Carnation Revolution is the foundational moment of contemporary Portuguese democracy, as it enabled the legal codification of emancipatory rights and citizenship entitlements to social security, education and health. Despite the undisputed significance of the gains of the Carnation Revolution, they were not enough to prevent continuities of deeply ingrained patterns of social inequality within a macro-context of shifting dynamics of accumulation. The peripheral nature of its economy and the requirements of alignment with the global ascendancy of neoliberalism shape Portugal's uneven integration in more extensive capitalist circuits. The disconnection between the socialist-oriented goals of Portugal's

revolutionary process and external neoliberal requirements intensifies the endemic fragilities of the economy. Such fragilities were stabilized through the adoption of free-market policies, which included the acceptance of a decline in real wages following the macroeconomic stabilization packages agreed with the IMF in the late 1970s and the 1980s, and legitimized through a morally embedded national project of economic and social freedom, mirroring the aspirations of the majority of the population.

Portugal's integration into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986 is described as the realization of the collective aspirations for freedom and modernity nurtured since the revolution. Ideas of social modernity and economic progress were the central 'ideological conductors' (Hall et al., 1978: vii, viii) legitimating the gradual emergence of a neoliberal state project of accumulation and development. The promise of modernity was also the moral framework guiding working-class people's intra-generational livelihood investment strategies, as they articulated ways of acting upon their needs in the present, and the needs of others in the future. These two projects – that of a neoliberal state project of development and intra-generational livelihood projects of middle-class distinction – went hand in hand, mutually legitimating and informing one another. In parallel with the neoliberal reconfiguration of the economy, public state investment in welfare provisioning increased, social security expanded, and access to higher education was made available on a larger scale. Fulfilling people's social needs for security and status for themselves and the next generation constituted the legitimating counterpoint to growing economic neoliberalization. Portuguese 'embedded neoliberalism' entailed financial liberalization, labour deregulation and banking privatization in parallel with the expansion and, in some cases, reinforcement, of state social protection, which served the purpose of legitimizing the former (Rodrigues and Reis, 2012: 19). Such contradictory developments have generated a diffuse common-sense perspective among working-class people regarding

incomplete projects of equality and modernity grounded on the contradictions and tensions underpinning the revolutionary conjuncture and its aftermath. As shown later in the article, the diffuse common sense of resentment and distrust vis-à-vis the state's redistributive failures became instrumental in asserting the legitimacy of austerity following the Great Recession of 2008. Initially triggered by a subprime mortgage crisis in the USA, the Great Recession caused a global financial and banking crisis which rapidly expanded to Europe. National states allocated the taxpayer money to bail-out over-indebted banks. The result was an exponential increase of the levels of public debt, turning a banking crisis into a sovereign debt crisis and prompting the subsequent shift towards austerity, with the first EU-IMF bailout package given to Greece in 2010. In Portugal, a minority government led by the Socialist Party adopted various austerity packages designated as 'Stability and Growth Programmes'. When the last austerity package was rejected in parliament, the government resigned. This was followed by a request of financial assistance to the EU.

Portugal signed a four-year structural adjustment programme agreement with the Troika in May 2011, resulting in a €78 billion bailout. Under the aegis of a newly elected right-wing coalition government, harsh tax increases, spending cuts and reduction of welfare benefits shaped the programme's implementation (Reis, 2014). From the outset, the coalition government publicly announced its willingness to go 'beyond the Troika' (*ir para além da Troika*). The prime minister and members of government stressed that the national condition of social emergency required harsher policy measures to be taken regarding the labour market, welfare provisioning and privatizations of state assets than those agreed with the Troika in the memorandum of understanding.

The government claimed for itself the role of saving the country from 'errors of past governments', in light of the 'national condition of social emergency' (Moury and Standing, 2017). The government's willingness to go 'beyond the Troika' was

progressively underpinned by a dramatization of ‘patriotic duty’ and ‘historical mission’ in the country’s economic recovery trajectory. The constraints imposed by the adjustment programme were mobilized as a resource to enhance the government’s capacity and legitimacy in the acceleration of the neoliberal rearrangement of rights and welfare logics of redistribution (Hespanha, 2000). The politics of going ‘beyond the Troika’ did not go unchallenged. Between 2011 and 2013 public discontent found expression in the biggest popular demonstration ever to take place under the Portuguese democratic regime. Overall, however, accommodation and acceptance among the majority of the population became stronger between 2013 and 2014.

In March 2011, the then leader of the main opposition political party – soon to be prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho – insisted that there was no need to ‘demonize’ the IMF. Passos Coelho presented his political programme for confronting the country’s ‘dramatic situation’ by focusing on two main aspects: securing social cohesion through the implementation of a programme of ‘social emergency’, and the utmost necessity of implementing a set of measures grounded on the ‘rationalization’ of state public spending. The latter focused primarily on wage and pension cuts, the freezing of career promotions in the public sector, cuts in the public health sector and tax increases. The rationalization of state public spending was justified as the only available means of bringing about a greater redistributive efficiency and fairness; and this would inform the policies later undertaken in the context of the implementation of the structural adjustment programme. After being elected in May 2011, the right-wing coalition government led by Passos Coelho launched a four-year Programme of Social Emergency with the aims of ‘fighting the lack of efficiency’ (in state redistributive practices) and ‘changing the paradigm of social response to severe material deprivation’. The Programme of Social Emergency constituted a shift in the model and logic of welfare redistribution, with the state increasingly delegating its responsibilities

to the third sector while reinforcing a broader logic of charity and poor relief in welfare provisioning (Joaquim, 2015).

The structural adjustment programme was reframed as a window of opportunity to ‘rethink the state and its functions’, particularly with regard to welfare provision. In 2012 the government commissioned the IMF to prepare a study focused on how best to proceed with selected options for expenditure reform. The study (IMF, 2013) suggested a focus on reducing the government’s wage bill (classifying public servants as an over-privileged professional group) and pensions spending (referring to the social protection system as being too expensive) – recommendations which the government diligently implemented in 2013 and 2014. The imperative of ‘rethinking the state and its functions’ gained traction among the working-class population partly due to long-lasting common-sense understandings regarding underdeveloped and inefficient features of welfare state redistribution. These features were perceived as preventing the materialization of broader developmental patterns of modernity and equality in the livelihood pursuits and citizenship aspirations of ordinary people. The pronounced wage cuts of public servants were justified as a way of equalizing the wages of the former to those in the private sector. This argument appealed to a persistent historical idiom of vilification of public servants, who are considered to be in a position of privilege vis-à-vis workers in the private sector because of the greater security and stability of their conditions of employment, their access to a specific regime of public health insurance, and their more valued and respected social status. Also, spending cuts were framed as a way of ‘cutting down the fat of the state’ (*cortar as gorduras do estado*), which metaphorically indicated the need to eliminate the ‘excess weight’ caused by the existence of networks based on nepotism and political clientelism which were consuming state resources. Among working-class people, these two particular examples resonated with historically grounded perceptions and feelings towards

the state as a divisive and corrupt entity which had failed to fulfil expectations of equality. This perception mediated the re-signification of austerity as an ‘opportunity’ to redeem old and new forms of inequality and citizenship relegation. Targeting public sector workers is a common policy in structural adjustment programmes implemented in various countries from the 1970s onwards. However, its effectiveness in framing austerity as an opportunity in Portugal was mediated by the government’s mobilization of contingent and historically grounded common-sense discourses and moral sentiments linking redistributive failures, citizenship relegation and the unfulfilled aspirations of working-class people.

Unlike Portugal, which joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986, Italy was a founding member of the EEC, from its creation in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome. In spite of its long-standing membership, Italy’s path towards financial integration in the EU which started with the signing of the Single European Act (1986) and was subsequently ratified by the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), was no less painful. These agreements triggered a profound reorganization of the state and the economy. In this historical phase, the instability of the Italian political scene further differentiated Italy from the Portuguese case, which was characterized by the continuity – up to the present – of the post-Carnation Revolution party establishment. In 1992, a massive judicial investigation into political corruption (known as *Mani pulite*, Clean hands) marked the final breakdown of the crisis-ridden Italian post-Second World War political establishment (Ginsborg, 2003: 249–284). In journalistic jargon, this moment was popularized as the transition to a ‘Second Republic’, also epitomised by the phenomenal rise of media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi into national politics.

Since the early 1990s, Italy has been undergoing a persistent process of neoliberal reorganization of the state and the economy, through large-scale privatization of public assets, a strong fiscal austerity programme, administrative decentralization, welfare reforms

and labour deregulation (Cozzolino and Giannone, 2019; Graziani, 1998). While framing this process as ‘a project of modernization’, policy-makers and economic elites have also insisted on its incomplete character – an ‘unfinished transition’ – thus recursively calling for the adoption of more decisive reform policies aiming at the ‘full’ ‘modernization’ of the country (Cozzolino, 2019; Ginsborg, 2003; Rossi, 2008). The national technocratic elite identified so-called ‘external constraint’ (*vincolo esterno*) as a viable solution to the ineffectiveness of political decision-making processes (Dyson and Featherstone, 1996; Ferrera and Gualmini, 2004; Ginsborg, 2003; Moschella, 2017). According to this view (conventionally attributed to a key figure of the Italian banking system, Guido Carli), structural reforms could only be accomplished through an external system of binding rules (e.g. the Treaty of Maastricht) that constrained the ruling elite to undertake decisions that could undermine their political support. External constraints – either in the form of financial markets or simply ‘Europe’ as an empty signifier (Cozzolino and Giannone, 2019) – have become central in the discursive strategies used by policy-makers to legitimize unpopular measures (cuts in public expenditure, tax increases, welfare retrenchment and labour deregulation) deemed necessary to redress the flaws of the Italian economy from the point of view of international markets (excessive public debt, low competitiveness). The implementation of more radical austerity measures during the sovereign debt crisis, enacted by a ‘technocratic government’ backed by European institutions, rested on similar discursive strategies. Austerity politics has therefore come to be viewed as the necessary response to European demands. While this identification has nurtured Euro-sceptical positions, these have not substantially altered the political orientations of successive governments (centre-right and centre-left) thus far, leaving the external binding power of ‘Europe’ unchallenged.

In August 2011, the European Central Bank delivered a ‘strictly confidential’ letter

to Silvio Berlusconi's government, signed by outgoing governor Jean Claude Trichet and incoming governor Mario Draghi. This informal memorandum listed a number of structural reforms (including liberalization and privatization of public services, and the revision of welfare and labour legislation) 'to be implemented as soon as possible' (*Financial Times*, 2011). The missive was published by the press only later in September, unleashing heated reactions that were exacerbated by alarmist warnings on the increase in Italian-German bond yield spreads and the troublesome position of Berlusconi, who was in the midst of several judicial investigations. In this frenzy of public hysteria based on fear that the country would default, the leading national financial newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* urged the government to 'Hurry up!' (*Fate presto!*), while providing its readers with 'anti-panic instructions' (*Manuale antipánico*). The newspaper headline<sup>5</sup> was a telling example of the temporal metaphors of acceleration, urgency and compression that presented austerity measures as necessary and urgent in order to prevent Italy from defaulting. Fear of the country's loss of credibility in the face of the ECB's requests increased pressures for a political change of leadership, which were openly supported by the then president of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano (Cozzolino, 2019). The appointment of the former EU commissioner and economist Mario Monti<sup>6</sup> as prime minister in November 2011 was welcomed with mixed feelings of relief – as he was presented as the right man at the right time – but also anxiety, given Monti's immediate and direct warnings on the type of measures necessary in the emergency the country was facing.

Despite his critics, the rise to power of Mario Monti in 2011, with the reassuring agreement of the ECB and EU, was welcome. His rise was seen as the European salvific intervention (e.g. external constraint) in a situation of extreme exceptionality. Consequently, national public opinion to some extent supported the intrusive recommendations of Draghi and Trichet (Comelli, 2012). According to the dominant

narrative, the pressures on the discredited political elite might assist economic recovery and the EU played, once again, the role of a *deus ex machina* capable of forcing the national political elites to accomplish the long-awaited reform of welfare and labour legislation. Hailed as a government of national salvation (*salvezza nazionale*), due to its alleged apolitical and technocratic character, the experts' cabinet immediately announced the harsh measures the moment required, asking for unconditional political support from both centre-right and centre-left coalitions. The core decree they promptly issued, containing the main austerity measures, was tellingly labelled 'Save Italy' (*Salva Italia*) to stress the urgency of reducing the budget deficit and improving the country's competitiveness by reforming the pension system, cutting public expenditure and increasing labour flexibilization.

Such politics were opposed by fragmentary mobilizations and episodic outbreaks of popular protest known as 'the pitchfork movement' (*Movimento dei forconi*), which became publicly visible between 2012 and 2013 (Loperfido, 2018).<sup>7</sup> Austerity measures were received with a mixture of rage and resentment, but mostly with a surprising degree of passive acceptance. The moralization of responsibility in what had been deemed an exceptional moment was underlined by the government through a show of rigour and frugality, with the clear aim of breaking from the flamboyant style of the previous government. The Minister of Labour Elsa Fornero provided two paradigmatic examples of the government's attitude. During the press conference where pension reforms were presented, she broke down in tears because of the 'sacrifice' the reforms entailed, further changing the calculation of pension benefits for all categories of workers and gradually raising the retirement age. In the second, she sarcastically scolded 'the youth' for being too 'choosy' (using the English word) when searching for a job. On the one hand, the exceptionality of the situation framed the inevitable and necessary implementation of radical measures that further advanced the redefinition of the regulatory and redistributive

role of the state. On the other hand, her performance of empathy and affective understanding for the consequences of austerity, along with the moralization of risk-taking and self-help, elicited people's submissive compliance to the changing role and function of the state.

In Portugal and Italy, austerity narratives relied upon the framing of accelerated neoliberalization as contributing to the fulfilment of incomplete projects of equality or modernization, using different discursive strategies, but both equally grounded on common-sense elements: one emphasized national strength (i.e. 'going beyond the Troika') to cope with internal flaws (the failure of state-led redistributive equity in Portugal) and the other emphasized external constraints (i.e. the European '*vincolo esterno*') to tackle internal weaknesses (the inability of national political elites to ensure the full modernization of Italy).

### **Ideology of sacrifice**

In Portugal and Italy, the austerity project of fiscal consolidation was re-embedded in a collective and recognizable framework of morality grounded on the ideology of sacrifice. The latter resonates with the Welfare Reform Act 2012, through which the right-wing Coalition government led by David Cameron in Britain (2010–15) managed popular consent over the deepest cuts to public expenditure since the Second World War. Clarke and Newman (2012) suggest that popular consent in Britain involved the intense ideological work of forging a new hegemonic consensus regarding the causes and meanings of the economic crisis, and of austerity as a rational solution. Austerity was the 'object of magical thinking', involving the reiteration of the moral obligation to comply with austerity policies as a form of 'collective pain sharing' grounded on the promise of hardship and the

memory of post-war sensibilities. The ‘facade of togetherness’ (Cooper and Whyte, 2017: 7) coexisted with the targeting of migrants and benefits claimants seen as those to blame for undercutting wages and exploiting public services.

We suggest that the different forms, yet similarly convergent outcomes, through which the ideology of sacrifice has been mobilized in different national contexts point to its hegemonic quality: ensuring consent for austerity measures by enabling the integration of different interests and constituencies across different scales (the individual, the family, the nation) and temporalities (past, present and future) within the same economic reconfiguration. The ideology of sacrifice enables those who hold power to stabilize structural patterns of social differentiation and articulates past, present and future temporalities through collective moral obligations, kinship responsibilities and forms of social solidarity, as well as divisive logics of resentment. Specifically, the mobilization of the ideology of sacrifice by nation-states couples the austerity discourse of scarcity and fiscal consolidation with a popular ethics of austerity arising from working people’s accumulated common-sense knowledge about livelihood strategies of survival and inter-generational projects of social mobility and worth. In doing so, individuals are positioned not only as subjects of austerity but also as its agents, who are called upon to redeem the future and prosperity of the country through their practices, behaviours and choices.

In Portugal, the ideology of sacrifice was mobilized by the prime minister and members of government, in particular, who promised that the certainty of the immediate suffering inflicted on the population would be rewarded in the future. One of the sentences used most often by the then prime minister, Passos Coelho, was that ‘Portuguese people are aware that their sacrifices will bear fruit in the future.’ The government’s deployment of the ideology of sacrifice was strengthened by the intervention of members of the economic and banking elites, who stressed the imperative of enduring hardship and suffering as a way of

distinguishing the Portuguese case from that of Greece; and by representatives of Catholic-oriented food charity organizations who framed the austerity sacrifice as a consequence of people's guilt in 'having lived above their means', with a return to a livelihood logic of frugal domesticity offering the only possibility of redemption. The ideology of sacrifice mediated the ways in which austerity was linked to ideas of national collective responsibility, the moral obligation of enduring impoverishment and the imperative of shifting economic behaviour, conduct and choices according to the motto of 'making the same with less'. These ideas spoke directly to the working classes' ingrained livelihood experience and morality that inter-generational sacrifices and deferrals of livelihood improvement would result in social mobility for future generations – as explored later in this article.

The government articulated the inevitability of austerity as a consequence of the errors of past governments, which led the country to an unsustainable financial position. The inevitability of austerity was paired with its necessity as a form of generational repair, moral collective responsibility and source of national pride. Towards the end of 2012, with an unemployment rate above 15%, an increasing number of companies announcing bankruptcy, growing emigration rates, and a severe reduction in household income, the prime minister made a public statement announcing further austerity measures in the 2013 national budget. In his Christmas message of 2012 the prime minister used Facebook to leave a message of comfort to the Portuguese population:

This was not the Christmas we deserved. [...] For many this was a year full of sacrifices.[...] I only ask you to find the strength to look at your children and grandchildren not with a heavy heart but with the pride of those who know that the sacrifices you are making now, the difficult decisions that we have to take now, we are doing them so that our children may have a better Christmas in the future

(*Expresso*, 2012).

The government's pursuit of a new austerity consensus grounded on the supposedly collective sacrificial capabilities of the Portuguese people as a homogeneous entity went hand in hand with the moral disqualification of those who did not conform to a culture of individual risk-taking, self-autonomy, entrepreneurship spirit and independence. In January 2012, after signing a cooperation agreement with the unions and employers' associations, he thanked 'those who are willing to leave their comfort zone' and alter 'their traditional entitlement posture' (*postura reivindicativa tradicional*). This comment was followed by another in the same year, during a visit to a secondary school, in which the prime minister exhorted those who considered it was possible to 'improve, get a job done and regain prosperity without any suffering' to 'stop feeling sorry for themselves' (*não sermos piégas*). These comments slanted discussions regarding the unemployed, welfare recipients and public servants, who were seen by the government as over-protected and complacent. Unemployment was portrayed as an 'opportunity to change one's life', while young people and secondary high school teachers were invited to embrace emigration to Portuguese-speaking countries as a potential promise of individual success. The government's political narrative targeted the unemployed, welfare recipients and public servants as those unable to embrace emancipation from 'anachronistic solidarities, welfare state provisions and legal protections to become available for the neoliberal sacrifice' (Brown, 2016: 14) – and thus responsible for preventing fulfilment of the austerity promise of growth and collective prosperity.

To signal the end of the adjustment programme, in May 2014, the government held a public conference, emphasizing the feelings of 'duty accomplished', while 'congratulating the Portuguese people' on their resilience and on enduring a 'harsh programme' (*Expresso*, 2014). Starting his speech by referring to the Carnation Revolution

of 1974, the prime minister declared that 17 May 2014 was also going to become part of 'our history', as the day 'of tribute to each and every one of you, the day when your freedom of choice was reclaimed by each one of you'. The prime minister made a parallel between the gains obtained through the adjustment programme in the present and those that were obtained through the sacrifices that the Portuguese people had to bear before entering the EEC in 1986. In his speech the prime minister sought to emphasize national cohesion in the way the people had stuck to and accommodated sacrifice at the most critical conjunctures of democratic Portugal (i.e. the Carnation Revolution, joining the EEC and the recent austerity predicament).

Between 2011 and 2014, the translation of austerity by the prime minister and members of government into a morality of sacrifice enabled a re-working of the past narratives and common sense about the need for austerity. The imperative of sacrifice for one's country through collective impoverishment evoked the 'natural tendency of Portuguese people towards piety and sacrifice' disseminated by the authoritarian regime of the *Estado Novo* (1933–74). The regime's propaganda ministry disseminated the image of Portugal as an 'essentially rural country', 'poor but honourable and honest', images cherished by the regime and its allied classes (e.g. the conservative rural oligarchy). Under fascist rule, the moralization of poverty and the enforced reality of scarcity shaped the livelihood strategies of large segments of the population, including poor service workers, rural landless peasants and super-exploited factory workers. Those livelihood practices and investments included the deferral of the improvement of life conditions to the next generation through investment in the acquisition of educational capital or large-scale emigration. It is estimated that between the 1950s and 1974, 2 million Portuguese left the country. The prime minister's allusion to the Carnation Revolution of 1974 and the sacrifices imposed in order to join the EEC, emphasizing the idea of collective

responsibility in the attainment of freedom, social change and economic prosperity, further reinforced the evocation of common-sensical ideas and livelihood practices grounded on past experiences and knowledges to overcome material privation and articulate a horizon of future and hope (Narotzky and Besnier, 2014) in a country shaped by ingrained patterns of social inequality.

The austerity sacrifice prompted the enactment of popular austerities of survival grounded on a moral grammar of obligations, responsibilities and interdependencies structuring relationships and livelihood projects, within and between generations. In Setúbal, family-based coping strategies to temper the effects of austerity policies included an increase in co-residence of more than one generation in the same household; the sharing of available income from old age pensions across generations; emigration; and the increased 're-familialization' of welfare production. Multiple-generation households functioned as a cushion against the most extreme effects of austerity policies and acted as a savings mechanism; but they also intensified tensions between generations regarding expectations of autonomy and dependency (Matos, 2019). Older generations feel a sense of being drained of their resources at an age when they expected that their sons and daughters would help them. Younger generations, on the other hand, experience the prolonged dependency upon their parents and grandparents as a form of material and moral failure, reminding them of their inability to achieve autonomous respectable adulthood through stable and protected employment (in the production sphere), and a recognized lifestyle in accordance with their middle-class status aspirations through home ownership and economic independence (in the consumption sphere). In a significant number of households, emigration re-emerged as both a survival strategy and way of sustaining educational investments in the younger generations. In 2013 alone, 110,000 people left the country (*Expresso*, 2015). Contrary to what happened during the dictatorship, those

emigrating were not the youngsters but rather men in their early 50s and 60s who, after losing their jobs in industry and the service sector, through networks of friends and acquaintances, left to work in foreign countries – particularly the UK or Portuguese-speaking countries, including Mozambique and Angola – sometimes in very precarious conditions. For Matos's informants, emigration was the only available means to deal with the lack of jobs in the country, but it was also a way of enabling the younger generations 'to have a better life'. 'Having a better life' meant preventing the younger generations from getting involved in exploitative low-paid jobs, perceived as an obstacle towards the pursuit of educational capital acquisition by finishing secondary education and obtaining a university degree.

The prominence of masculine emigration, together with a retrenchment of family social protection policies, reduction of welfare benefits and social services, combined with lack of jobs, decreasing available household income and growing patterns of intra-generational forms of dependency intensified the 're-familialization' of welfare production among working-class households in Setúbal. The re-familialization of welfare was an expression of people's awareness of unequal structures of welfare state redistribution and their willingness to mobilize family assets to ensure a more valued and recognized livelihood for the next generation. At the same time, the re-familialization of welfare also entailed an overburdening of women with paid and unpaid forms of work and care, inside and outside the household (Sarkis and Matos, 2020). This was particularly notable in women's combination of various forms of formal and informal money-earning activities (including, for instance, working formally as a cleaner and informally selling home-made pastries or cakes); daily caring for younger members of the household or older kin living in other households; and engaging in neighbourhood networks of mutual help and solidarity, which are essential for the circulation of fundamental material and immaterial livelihood

resources (e.g. free food, personal favours and information about jobs openings in the city).

As happened in Portugal and in the rest of Europe (Brown, 2016), in Italy, too, during the austerity crisis, the reiterated appeal to ‘shared sacrifices’ defined a powerful and yet controversial tenet of the austerity narrative. The mundane discourse of the ineluctable sacrifice and its underlying morality resonated with the deep-rooted Catholic pattern of sin, atonement and salvation, in which ‘making a sacrifice’ is a painful but morally positive act. However, the austerity narrative was also charged with temporal metaphors that evoked other narratives, ambitions and expectations of inter-generational social mobility among working people. The sacrifice demanded by austerity was described as an act of responsibility towards future generations, mobilizing an entire moral temporality in which present sacrifices were bound to past and future obligations.

The appeal to sacrifice was also a recurrent discursive strategy in the recent political history of the country, and was mobilized by various political actors at different moments of crisis. During the 1970s oil crises, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, Enrico Berlinguer (1977), viewed ‘austerity as an opportunity to transform Italy’, proposing notions of working-class sacrifice and thrift as the basis of a new reformist political project. A year later, the general secretary of the main union confederation CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro), Luciano Lama (Lama and Scalfari, 1978), spoke in favour of ‘wage restraint’ in a well-known interview, published in the newspaper *La Repubblica* with the title: ‘The sacrifices we are asking for from workers’. In a context of profound revision of the orientation of labour unions (see Graziani, 1998: 121–2), the interview anticipated the ‘politics of sacrifice’ that was launched the same year at the CGIL union congress, which marked a stark break with the two previous decades of social and labour unrest.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1990s, during a severe currency crisis and amidst the atmosphere of ‘purification’ triggered by judicial investigations into political corruption, the technocratic

cabinet led by Giuliano Amato, while undertaking massive budgetary cuts to repair the ‘excess’ and ‘spendthrift’ public budgets of previous decades, mobilized the rhetoric of ‘temporary’ sacrifice being ‘painful but necessary’.<sup>9</sup> In the late 1990s, centre-left governments (headed by Romano Prodi and Massimo D’Alema) explicitly acknowledged ‘the sacrifices’ made to fulfil EU demands, pledging that the European integration process would be ‘a great opportunity’ (Cozzolino and Giannone, 2019: 455).<sup>10</sup> At the end of 2010, Silvio Berlusconi optimistically foresaw a new year of economic recovery, though he added that ‘more sacrifices will be needed before we can enjoy [its] fruits’ (*Wall Street Italia*, 2014). One year later, his successor Mario Monti, in his parliamentary budget speech, recognized the acuteness of the sacrifices that the government demanded. He also made it clear that sacrifices were necessary to guarantee a better future, but also to safeguard the ‘well-being achieved in sixty years, through the efforts and sacrifices made by four generations of Italians’ (*il Post*, 2011). Speaking on TV, he acknowledged that the government was asking for ‘heavy sacrifices’, though he was confident that ‘Italians will understand’. This time, sacrifices were deemed inevitable and necessary in order to avoid ‘ending up like Greece’ (*La Repubblica*, 2011).

In 2015, working people in Brindisi were still grappling with the depressive effects of austerity cuts and measures and compelled to deal with increasing unemployment,<sup>11</sup> job insecurity, reduced retirement payments, a weak local welfare system and poor municipal services. As southerners, they were also confronted with the public warning of actually ‘ending up like Greece’. In July 2015, while the dramatic referendum on the Greek bailout was taking place across the Adriatic Sea, the national press relaunched and amplified the presentation of the annual report of the Association for the Industrial Development of Southern Italy (SVIMEZ, 2015), which emphatically reported the Italian South was ‘worse than Greece’. Headlines and titles such as ‘Greek darkness in the South’ (headline,

*Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*) and ‘Disaster in the South, our Greece’ (opinion article, *Il Manifesto*) were meant to portray the southern regions’ catastrophic socio-economic conditions.

Having to deal with the dire prospects of the next generation, parents in Brindisi, whenever possible, supported their children’s departure – usually to northern Italy – to pursue education or to search for a job. By doing so they were inevitably confronted with mixed and contradictory feelings: the comforting hope that their children would have more opportunities elsewhere, combined with the bitter feeling of distance and the awareness that they would never come back. This also entailed a significant financial drain for working-class households, which compelled parents to manage their budget according to the children’s demands, thus creating potential inter-generational tensions (Narotzky and Pusceddu, 2020). In this painful adjustment to the uncertain local socio-economic scenario, which made emigration a common strategy in order to pursue realistic projects of social promotion, or simply to make a living, the idea of sacrifice was central in providing the moral basis for households’ financial strains and constraints for future generations. Parents would recall how sacrifices were necessary and important ‘for the children’ (*per i figli*) but also how their children had to be raised with the idea that sacrifice is necessary. Social reproduction strategies often required some form of parental ‘renunciation’ in favour of the next generation. For instance, the severance package of a retired mechanical worker funded the daughter’s share in a cooperative that was setting up a private nursery. Similar arrangements to secure a job for their children had been common in the recent past, especially in the chemicals sector, where retiring workers were given the option to ‘pass’ the job to their sons (rarely the daughters) after relinquishing the severance package (an arrangement called ‘father-son exchange’). In the popularized entrepreneurial lexicon, these parental responsibilities were often framed as ‘investments’, thus entrusting to future

generations the moral and social return of the parents' sacrifice.

In 2016, Mimmo,<sup>12</sup> a factory worker formerly employed in a power plant, had just retired. With his wife Anna, they structured their household responsibilities around his income, which provided the basis for supporting family improvements (in housing) and the children's education. Supporting their son's education, as a law student in Bologna, was their main concern, which affected the whole allocation of family resources. After Mimmo's retirement, they thought of selling their apartment and applying for a mortgage to buy a detached house. However, they feared this could put too much strain on their ability to support their son. Explaining why they eventually gave up, Mimmo added that they had always tried to avoid 'biting off more than you can chew',<sup>13</sup> hence making careful calculations of what they can or cannot do. Taking pride in thrift and calculation conveyed the idea that working people's achievements (e.g. a graduate son) are more praiseworthy than those of 'the rich' that need no sacrifice. The moral junction of worth and sacrifice did not erase the hard fact of class inequality, as shown by Anna, who once sceptically commented that despite 'all the sacrifices we have made', the fact of rising 'from below' (*dal basso*) could be an impediment to her son's career, since 'the sons of the rich' are considered to be 'more intelligent than ours'. Austerity discourses resonated with this entanglement of sacrifice and worthiness, recasting the class-based morality and experience of sacrifice into an ideology of collective sacrifice, phrased through the mantra 'we're all in this together'.

By mobilizing the idiom of sacrifice, austerity attained moral legitimacy, and a certain degree of popular consent, by turning a class-based narrative of inequality (the sacrifice of those who have less) into a collective (national) narrative of equality through sacrifice and responsibility. The use of powerful family metaphors, and the underpinnings of scarcity and parental responsibility that helped to shape this collective ideology of

sacrifice, were reinforced by the analogy of the public budget with the household budget (Forges Davanzati and Pauli, 2015). Like a family, the state is expected to avoid ‘biting off more than it can chew’.

Nevertheless, the shift from ordinary livelihood experiences and aspirations to state financial sustainability does not occur without friction. The collective ideology of sacrifice has left room open for tensions and contestation. Discontent with the uneven distribution of sacrifice and European budgetary rules have created the conditions for the expansion of populist and authoritarian political projects – from the conservative Five Star Movement (FSM) to the rise of Matteo Salvini’s Lega Nord (LN).<sup>14</sup> However, while the FSM managed to build an outstanding electoral consensus by targeting ‘the privilege’ of the ‘parasitic’ elite (or ‘the caste’ – *la casta*)<sup>15</sup> to the detriment of ordinary citizens’ sacrifice, frictions and tensions have been more effectively channelled against migrants and refugees, depicted as unwanted competitors for scarce resources, as conveyed by Salvini’s slogan ‘Italians first’ (*prima gli italiani*). Moreover, in spite of the anti-Europeanist stances underpinning the claiming back of ‘national sovereignty’, these scapegoating strategies mobilize the same ideological tropes that provide legitimacy to austerity, such as scarcity and the state’s parental responsibility, with a more openly racist and exclusionary twist.

### **Conclusion: austerity as common sense**

The deployment of the historical idiom and morality of sacrifice was instrumental in the ideological legitimation of austerity policies linked to a recognizable grounded framework of collective responsibilities, obligations and solidarities. In this article we have investigated the means by which austerity narratives were able to become hegemonic as the common sense of the populations in multiple nation-states by comparing the Portuguese

and Italian discourses and dissemination of these discourses. We have examined how nation-states engaged in the local translation of austerity policies according to the metaphors of opportunity and exceptionality. The latter served the purpose of enabling the acceleration of the neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state, deployed according to a moral grammar of justification grounded on an already well-established common sense that articulated national sacrifice with incomplete projects of equality and modernization. What we designate as the ideology of sacrifice aims to capture the relational dimension of the state and its linkage with the negotiation and maintenance of consent. Historical analogies of sacrifice and popular conceptions of austerity are mutually re-signified in the concrete experience of working-class people. We have suggested that the ideology of sacrifice enhances the austerity consensus because it transfers the dominant contradiction of scarcity and having a 'life worth living' towards the realm of livelihood strategies of survival and inter-generational moral obligations in the fulfilment of projects of social mobility.

In Portugal and Italy, the making of austerity as common sense was thus particularly shaped by the role of nation-states in the local translation of austerity policies and in the activation of historical legacies of popular conceptions of austerity. This reinforces the view that, while austerity is a global project of capital restructuring, whose agenda is determined by the intervention of international financial institutions, the differentiated outcomes following the implementation of austerity policies derive from factors pertaining to history, context and locale. That is, the variegated forms of 'actually existing austerity' – following Brenner and Theodore's (2002) theorization of neoliberalism – result from the ways in which macroeconomic policies of welfare retrenchment, spending cuts and mass unemployment interact with specific local, institutional and historical features, including the embodied legacies and moral repertoires of arguments underpinning the livelihood praxis and struggles for worth of working-class people – what we have designated

throughout this article as ‘popular austerities’.

The contingent underpinnings of actually existing austerity regimes played a key role in shaping the political and social developments that followed the unfulfilled sacrifice rewards of economic prosperity and growth for European populations. In the volatile Italian political scenario, the Lega Nord regained prominence through an exclusionary nationalist trope targeting migrants and refugees as undeserving recipients of national sacrifice, thus channelling anger and discontent towards foreign intruders. Appeal to national sovereignty was framed as a reaction to European binding rules (the ‘external constraint’) – the source of unrewarding sacrifice. This was also an important ingredient of the Five Star Movement political discourse against the national party establishment. In Portugal, the austerity framework and its aftermath enhanced the domestic strength of the political parties alternatively in power since the Carnation revolution – those defined as constituting the *arco da governação* (the governance arch), namely the Social Democrat Party and the Socialist Party. The former was a key player in the right-wing coalition which implemented a structural adjustment programme that constituted the greatest transfer of resources from labour to capital in democratic times. Through a populist, authoritarian and divisive rhetoric, targeting the unemployed, welfare recipients and public servants, the right-wing coalition ensured a significant degree of popular consent, obtaining the highest number of votes in the 2015 national elections. The right wing coalition did not reach a working majority and the Socialist Party was invited to form government after securing the unprecedented support from the Portuguese Communist Party and the Left Bloc with the agreement of rolling back austerity policies. These parties have indeed forced the Socialist government to implement policies which have had a real effect in alleviating the hardship of the austerity years. The Socialist party has since been maintaining voting intentions above 30% even during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. In the national elections of 2019 the

newly formed political party Chega (Enough) elected one member of parliament. Through an openly racist, anti-democrat and anti-immigration rhetoric Chega has since been exploiting public discontent and deep-seated social resentments. The emergence of Chega has benefited from the conditions created by the uneven distribution of sacrifices and European budgetary rules, while also representing a backlash from long-lasting conservative and authoritarian political sectors against the ‘anti-austerity project’ underpinning the unprecedented union of all the Portuguese political left from 2015 onwards. The ‘luso-anomaly’ (Finn 2017) suggests that the frustrated promises of the austerity sacrifice were not the sole cause prompting established and emerging political parties to adopt an increasingly populist and exclusionary political rhetoric. Rather, the collective ideology of sacrifice paved the ground for the expansion of populist and authoritarian political projects whose features are shaped by the particular histories underpinning institutional reconfigurations of the political map in Europe and beyond.

While our emphasis throughout this article was to address the pervasiveness of austerity, this does not mean that we do not consider it important to examine the struggles and frictions that spring from the contradictory and multi-sided character of common sense, which people’s framing of austerity enables us to envision (e.g. criticizing the state for being corrupt and unfair; narratives of unfairness and inequality; investing in the next generation; the significance of human worth in a context of impoverishment and disenfranchisement). The often polymorphic, episodic, molecular and unsystematic shape of these frictions and struggles can be read as a partial confirmation of the powerful combination of coercion and consent that have been sustaining actually existing austerity regimes. As we highlighted, following Gramsci, contradictions and incoherence render common sense, at any given historical moment, a ‘material force’ mobilized to support potentially different political and economic projects. The hegemonic power of austerity

suggests that struggles and frictions cannot be understood outside of the complex articulation of structural inequalities and the reconstitution of common sense. This analysis urges us to acknowledge that common sense can fuel forms of resistance and counter-hegemonic politics, while also hindering the effective pursuit of transformative social justice politics.

The anthropological theorization of austerity has been prominently shaped by a dual orientation, in which the recent austerity predicament has either been taken to lead to a break or rupture with previous developmental dynamics and lifeworld views (Knight and Stewart, 2016) or seen as yet another instantiation of a longer history of structural adjustment policies in which scarcity has been continuously deployed as a moral framework of control and regulation (Powers and Rakopoulos, 2019; Rakopoulos, 2018). Analysing the making of austerity as common sense, by focusing on how global economic orthodoxies are locally translated by nation-states through moral grammars of justification and the co-optation of popular forms of austerity, enables the duality between rupture or continuity in ideological formations to be overcome.

Gramsci's notion of common sense was ultimately underpinned by his view that for any political project of social transformation to succeed it had to seriously take into account the fragmentary, contradictory and heterogeneous narratives, ideas and practices informing the livelihood worlds and mental conceptions of the subaltern classes. In this respect, common sense is a material force, which draws its strength from being a taken-for-granted – obvious, almost natural, and rather passive – conception of the world. Gramsci's conceptualization of common sense as a 'chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions [...] in which one can find whatever one likes' (Gramsci, 1975: 1399) provides a further element in support of our argument that the making of austerity as a hegemonic project relied on stratified ideological conceptions. The mobilization of this 'chaotic aggregate' (*aggregato*

*caotico*) through the educative and coercive role of the state revealed how the re-crafting of hegemony and domination cannot but combine old and new conceptions (Crehan, 2002: 99–119).

Austerity is, in this respect, a matter of rupture as much as a matter of continuity of ideological formations reorganized and made effective in the contemporary ‘historical bloc’ – the historically specific combination of structure and superstructure that frames relations of power, hegemony and domination (Smith, 2004). Austerity ‘makes sense’ not only because of the coercive force of the state that sustains it, but also because of the resonance that it has been able to create and that was enabled by the patient ideological work mobilized within state formations. Our examination of austerity as common sense shows how the fundamental moral discourse that underpins austerity in both the Italian and Portuguese national contexts mobilizes deep-seated ideological fragments (e.g. sacrifice in the European Catholic tradition) and the likewise compelling imagination of working-class sacrifice that draws from livelihood experience, as well as from the social expectations of modernizing societies – still very much alive in the twilight of Keynesian welfare state society.

In conclusion, we want to suggest that envisioning austerity as common sense enables us to: (1) access the various ideological and institutional state forms emerging out of the articulation of force and consent; (2) become aware of the spatial variability of austerity regimes, and (3) examine the constitutive role of historical legacies of popular forms of austerity. We believe that doing so enables us to tackle the conundrum of the pervasiveness of austerity beyond the standpoint of denunciation towards one of critical engagement with its contingent, historical and contextual foundations.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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#### **Notes**



1. While accepting the well-established translation of the Italian *senso comune* as the English common sense, we also are aware that the meaning of the former does not bear the positive connotation of the latter. See the editors' note in (Gramsci, (1971: 323, fn. 1); see also (Crehan, (2011: 273-274); and Thomas, (2009: 16, fn. 61).
2. Translations from the Italian critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1975) are by the Authors.
3. The Troika is the decision-making group formed by the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Commission (EC), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
4. Ethnographic research was carried out in 2015–16 within the context of the ERC funded project 'Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and practice in the pursuit of livelihood', based at the University of Barcelona (P.I. Susana Narotzky). The project compared nine urban contexts in southern Europe, looking at how households articulate provisioning resources and conceptual frameworks in the wake of the austerity crisis. Matos and Pusceddu carried out fieldwork in Setúbal (Portugal) and Brindisi (Italy), respectively.
5. The headline alluded explicitly to that published by the newspaper *Il Mattino* in 1980, following the disastrous earthquake in the Irpinia area.
6. Mario Monti was European Commissioner for Internal Market, Services, Customs and Taxation (1995-1999) and for Competition (1999-2004).
7. The Pitchfork Movement was a short-lived mobilization that started in Sicily and spread quickly over almost all the country, led by right-leaning small businessmen. Relying on the support of self-employed truck-drivers, it managed to set up roadblocks that briefly led to the seizing up of the national road transport system.
8. Only one year earlier, on 17 February 1977, Lama's speech at the University of Rome was interrupted by Autonomia Operaia groups who contested the line of sacrifice for the 'national interest' (Ginsborg, 1990: 382). This was followed by a wave of political and judicial repression of the extra-parliamentary left in 1979, with the so-called '7 April' trial. Later on, the successful white-collar march against the strike and occupation of FIAT in Turin, on 14 October 1980, marked the symbolic end of an era (Ginsborg, 1990: 402–5).
9. The different effects brought about by the appeal to sacrifice in this period were nonetheless the result of the rapidly changing social and political scenario. Increasing taxation in the early 1990s, for instance, was opposed by small entrepreneurs, whose economic success had also depended on the relative tolerance of the state for small entrepreneurs evading taxes and whose revolt against the state was voiced by Lega Nord (Ginsborg, 2003).
10. Cozzolino and Giannone (2019) analysed the Documento di Programmazione Economico-Finanziaria (DPEF), that is, the main policy document of the Italian Republic, from 1988 to 2010.
11. According to data provided by the local job centre, in 2015 30% of the active population was in search of employment. In southern regions, unemployment rates doubled from 1977 (8%) to 2012 (17.2%), whereas central and northern regions recorded more contained increases (respectively, from 5.5% to 9.5% and from 5.8% to 7.4%; see ISTAT, 2013).
12. All names have been changed to pseudonyms.
13. The Italian phrasing of this expression is 'to make a step longer than the leg' (*fare il passo più lungo della gamba*).

14. The FSM, founded in 2009, entered Parliament in 2013. The LN was founded in 1989 as a northern regionalist party, becoming a constitutive force of all centre-right governmental coalitions from the mid-1990s onwards. Since 2014, with the rise of Salvini to the party leadership, the LN has turned to nationalist discourse, with the aim of capitalizing on popular discontent all over the country.

15. As put by Beppe Grillo, founder and ideologist of the FSM, the ‘class struggle has been replaced by the caste struggle, or better, by the struggle between those who produce wealth and social services, and a parasitic class, the castes’ (‘Lotta di casta’, *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, 7 July 2013 [<https://www.beppegrillo.it/lotta-di-casta/>]). The bestselling book *La casta*, written by journalists Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella, was first published in 2007 and has had innumerable editions since (Rizzo and Stella, 2007).

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