

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN SOCIOLOGY

# Austere Histories in European Societies

Social exclusion and the contest of colonial memories

Edited by Stefan Jonsson and  
Julia Willén



This well orchestrated volume provides a very welcome addition to postcolonial debates in Europe, avoiding colonial aphasia and making connection to contemporary issues of austerity, global processes of precarization and new landscapes of migration and racism. It gives a refreshing and original perspective on how colonial memories impact on current patterns of austerity and fiscal inequalities and vice versa on how new economic and political regimes are imbricated in processes of memorialization, commemoration and monumentalization of the past. It is in this multidisciplinary, comparative and historiographic effort that Europe emerges as a new arena where current economic and political crises affect not just our present but also our past.

Sandra Ponzanesi, *Professor of Gender and Postcolonial Studies,*  
*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*

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# Austere Histories in European Societies

In recent years European states have turned toward more austere political regimes, entailing budget cuts, deregulation of labour markets, restrictions of welfare systems, securitization of borders and new regimes of migration and citizenship. In the wake of such changes, new forms of social inclusion and exclusion appear that are justified through a reactivation of differences of race, class and gender.

Against this backdrop, this collection investigates contemporary understandings of history and cultural memory. In doing so, the reader will join the leading European contributors of this title in examining how crisis and decline in contemporary Europe trigger a selective forgetting and remodelling of the past. Indeed, *Austere Histories in European Societies* breaks new paths in scholarship by synthesizing and connecting current European debates on migration, racism and multiculturalism. In addition to this, the authors present debates on cultural memory and the place of the colonial legacy within an extensive comparative framework and across the boundaries of the humanities and social sciences.

This book will appeal to scholars and students across the social sciences and humanities, particularly in European studies, memory studies, sociology, post-colonial studies, migration studies, European history, cultural policy, cultural heritage, economics and political theory.

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# **Austere Histories in European Societies**

Social exclusion and the contest of colonial memories

**Edited by Stefan Jonsson and  
Julia Willén**

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# Preface

This book is an investigation into how current economic and political crises affect not just our present but also our past. At the heart of the investigation are two questions. How do new regimes of historiography and memory culture relate to emerging and established patterns of integration, discrimination, and social fragmentation in European societies? How do present policies of austerity and the ensuing social exclusion of migrants and minorities influence our perceptions of the position of minorities, migrants and colonized peoples in European history? In asking such questions, the book intervenes into a trans-European discussion on multiculturalism, diversity, integration and migration, and it offers a new approach to disputes about the legacy of imperial and colonial systems that shaped Europe's position in the world. A distinctive feature of the book is its combination of perspectives from the social sciences and the humanities; this is a multidisciplinary book.

Our premise is that European societies have recently turned toward more austere political regimes. Proposed and executed budget cuts, changes on the labour market, restrictions of welfare systems and new regimes of migration and citizenship are examples of this tendency. In the wake of such changes, new forms of social inclusion and exclusion appear that are justified through a reactivation of differences of race, class and gender, all this serving, in its turn, to justify new forms of labour extraction and the formation of a new subaltern underclass or 'precariat'. Another consequence is that democracy itself has become precarious. While the agents and adherents of austerity programmes promote themselves as democracy's saviours, practitioners of democracy often find themselves pushed toward the extra-parliamentary margins.

It is against this backdrop that the book investigates contemporary understandings of history and cultural memory. Can we speak of an austere historiography, an enforcement of conformity on Europe past and present? Are we witnessing a turn toward austerity in theories and practices of historiography, in the same way as we speak about economic, social and political austerity programmes as a dominant way of wielding power in contemporary Europe and the West?

The impetus of the book was the symposium 'Austere Histories: Social Exclusion and the Erasure of Colonial Memory in Contemporary European

Societies', organized by the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society (REMESO) at Linköping University in November 2013, where contributions to this volume were presented in preliminary form. As editors, we wish to thank the authors gathered in this book and other participants at the symposium. The collective commitment to intellectual inquiry and criticism expressed by all involved has sustained our conviction that the problems raised in this book are both important and urgent. We also want to acknowledge our many colleagues at REMESO, a research community and intellectual collective whose members have developed path-breaking research on policies of austerity, global processes of precarization and new landscapes of migration and racism in Europe, all of which have enriched the conceptualization of this book. We also want to express our gratitude to the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) and FORTE: the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, which helped finance the symposium. A grant from the Sven och Dagmar Saléns stiftelse helped fund the edition and publication of this volume. We acknowledge this support with gratitude. Thanks are also due to Gila Walker for translation of one chapter and to Emily Briggs and her colleagues at Routledge for patience, friendly encouragement, experience and expertise. Finally, and especially important for a collection that addresses a political and cultural landscape in rapid transformation, we should like to point out that contributions to this book were completed between August 2015 and February 2016.

This book is dedicated to the victims of austerity, living and dead, in the open seas of the Mediterranean, on the islands of the Aegean, in the jungle of Calais, the streets of Barcelona, the hostels of Norrköping and elsewhere, everywhere.

S.J. and J.W. Norrköping, March 2016

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# 1 Introducing austere histories

*Stefan Jonsson and Julia Willén*

## Teaching conformity

Austere histories? ‘People will just have to pull their socks up. And tighten their belts. And figuratively rearrange other parts of their apparel until the mess is sorted out,’ writes Richard Seymour (2014: 29), decoding the overtones in the discourse of austerity that for some years has been disseminated from economic and political power centres of the West. Austerity indicates a withdrawal of entitlements, a condition of severity, or a situation of scarcity; it discharges people to look for work and scavenge for food to put on the table, as they must struggle to make ends meet. Austerity is also associated with commands, authoritarian or authoritative superiors whose calls to order and discipline, be they intended to mobilize against external threats or close ranks in times of internal troubles, necessitate prohibitions. Thus, a policy of austerity apparently institutes a more frugal order of life – some would say more safe and orderly, others more gloomy and dangerous – than what preceded it. The near past no longer appears as an era of stability and comfort, but as one of undeserved affluence and irresponsible excess. After days of butter and cream, come the lean years of bark and rye. This is how the strange rhetoric of austerity, as political economist Mark Blyth (2013a: 13) has it, turns economic concerns into ‘a morality play’ about Western civilization.

## *The new morality play of the West*

*Austere Histories* is a book that analyses this drama: how austerity turns economic concerns into moral and cultural ones; how it remodels historical consciousness and conceptions of Europe’s colonial past; how it changes the relationships between classes, ethnic minorities, majorities and migrants; and how all this affects the very definition and self-image of contemporary *European Societies*.

If translated into Freudian language, the idea of austerity would mean that desire has to be curbed and sublimated. It would compel us to renounce enjoyment and obey the command of the super-ego, the agent of austerity *par excellence*. Put differently, we would find ourselves in a social world teaching us to



bow to Identity – the social, cultural, racial, sexual or gendered identity ascribed to us by society, the symbolic order, or what Lacan used to call ‘the Name of the Father’ (Lacan, 1966/1997: 67). As identity here becomes a disciplinary force, ‘normal’ social processes in which relationships of self and other are incessantly reshaped, would be inhibited, giving way to an antagonistic relation between the two, the paranoid I being besieged by its countless projections of otherness. On a psychological and existential level, then, austerity implies a regime that consolidates identities. Austerity captures the psyche much in the same way as it trims the welfare state. In both, redistribution is replaced by repression.

Interestingly, analyses focusing on the economy are likely to match the psychoanalytic view. True, if one takes a superficial view of the matter, today’s neo-liberal austerity policies demand not firm identities but flexible ones. However, the called-for flexibility is regimented. It demands exceptional self-restraint. It trains the employee to postpone wish-fulfilment and renounce pleasure altogether (Southwood, 2011). This is because work life and labour markets are increasingly offering the opposite of what most people desire: to have a modest but stable income and lead orderly, predictable lives within their family circle and community, and to enjoy free time and leisure. As such, work life in its austere fitting precludes most forms of social bonding except one: loyalty to the employer. If you want to have a job and earn a living, you must be prepared to prioritize your employer; if in addition to that you want to make a career, you must also renounce family, children, home, health, holidays, education, dreams and expectations of the future.

Social and cultural theorists define this new relation between worker and employer, labour and capital, as ‘precarization’ (Bourdieu and Accardo, 1993; Schierup *et al.*, 2015). Some argue that it entails a new class formation: a ‘precarariat’ or global underclass created by processes of competition, downsizing, deregulation and exclusion (Standing, 2011). What are the people who are suffering this exclusion to do? If we take the case nearest to us, the political transformation of Sweden, we find that solutions recently on offer include career planning, job coaching, cognitive behaviour therapy, shopping around for the right schools, apprenticeships, and accepting lower wages.

Poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and ethnic discrimination are supposed, in this programme, to get fixed through cutbacks and intensified adaptation and competition, in which the excluded ones are expected to outdo one another in refashioning their personas and making themselves employable (Means, 2013). And if they fail? Austerity pundits will say that they are not trying hard enough; that they are unsuitable, by nature or nurture lazy, ruined by welfare benefits or have inadequate cultural values (Candideas, 2008). Those who fail to adapt to new job-market realities are often harassed and called white trash, unless they are called brown trash, or Muslim trash, or NEETs (not in education, employment or training), a dumped lot of outsiders, members of an underclass that, in addition (and whether white, brown or black), are often blamed for the rise of everything from populism and racism to urban riots and terrorism. In short, they are thrown outside the system and their misery is explained by

shortcomings inherent in their identity, if not in their genes. While these processes affect the lower classes the most, and undocumented migrants in particular, it also erodes the social security taken for granted by the middle classes, the members of which run the risk of similar degradation if they are fired, become ill or are hit by family crises. This has been graphically illustrated in recent years by numerous novels, theatre plays and TV series catering to the anxious middle classes, but also by anthropological work like Marc Augé's ethnofiction *No Fixed Abode* (2013).

Such are, in terms all too sweeping and general, some of the major ways in which the politics of austerity is transforming present-day European societies. It does not matter whether we view the world through a psychoanalytic or economic lens; in either case evocations of austerity elicit interpretations of society and human life as subjected to a regime that selects, sorts and separates human beings on criteria of identity. What we see emerging, it seems, is a social and political landscape starkly different from a regime founded in notions of equal rights and democratic citizenship. This landscape is the first point of departure for this book.

### *Austere histories for an austere present*

Our second point of departure has to do with the past. *Austere Histories* is the result of a shared investigation of the ways in which the politics of austerity translates into specific modalities of historical consciousness, modalities that would then also be marked by a consolidation of identity, and hence of antagonism and exclusion. Can we speak of an 'austere historiography', an enforcement of conformity on Europe past and present? As several authors in this collection exemplify, strong interests are today working to purge the histories of specific European nations, but also those of Europe and the West, from cultural plurality. Heroic and homogeneous stories about the past of nations, regions and religions are being retold and reinvented.

Is this a new tendency? Has not historiography, as Paul Veyne (1988: 77) once argued, always been complicit in issuing identity certificates for this or that community? Was this not, as Nietzsche (1874) observed, one of the essential functions of history writing?

To be sure, yes. But it is also true that, until recently, many of the historical narratives in light of which nations, regions, continents and civilizations understood themselves were in the process of multiplying. To use an expression by Michael Rothberg (2009), Europe's collective memory has since the 1960s become 'multidirectional', increasingly complex and heterogeneous, opening itself for long-occluded memories of the working classes, women, subalterns, defeated protest movements, persecuted minorities, migrants, colonized peoples, queer lives and experiences. Especially from the 1980s and onward, inaugurated by postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric narratives, historiography has become less concerned with drawing boundaries around communities and more interested in tracing relations, subterranean connections, suppressed voices, and

marginalized memories, all of which then, supposedly, provided new points of entry to the past.

Twenty years ago, Edward Said summed up this state of affairs in *Culture and Imperialism*: ‘We are, so to speak, *of* the connections, not outside and beyond them’ (Said, 1993: 55). After the inaugurating moment of Said and post-colonial theory, there has been a great deal of work that has employed postcolonial perspectives in a variety of historical and geographical contexts. There are by now few states and regions, few major institutions and international organisations, few modern traditions and canonised cultural figures that have not been subjected to intelligent and often revealing scrutiny from a postcolonial point of view. Yet today, this project of historical unlocking, multiplication and contestation appears to be challenged. Multiculturalism, postcolonial memories and minority discourses are being marginalized, and this at the very moment when it was reasonable to expect that they would be confirmed and inscribed as central concerns in any overview of European history and European society. An increasing number of historians and intellectuals are again turning a blind eye toward less gratifying parts of European history. Their ignorance is often politically sanctioned.

To what extent is this narrowing of the historical imagination related to the present moment of austerity politics in the contemporary West? Combining the two observations outlined above – that is, austerity as a general description of everyday life, work and media discourse in the present and austerity as a narrowing of historical consciousness and obsessions with group identity – we reach a third, synthetic problem, which is the one, precisely, that we confront in this book. If ‘austerity’ is an idea that informs economic, political and social policy in contemporary Europe, to what extent does it also influence the ways in which historians and intellectuals represent European history and the history of Europe’s nation-states? Or, if we turn the question around: to what extent and in which ways do present-day historical debate and practice of history writing support and legitimize the idea of ‘austerity’ and its social and political consequences, in the areas of citizenship and migration, for instance?

More specifically, the chapters that follow make up a shared endeavour and collective thinking that address two critical questions:

- 1 How do present policies of austerity and the ensuing social exclusion of migrants and minorities influence the perceptions and interpretations of the place of minorities, migrants and colonized peoples in European history?
- 2 How do new regimes of historiography and memory culture relate to emerging and established patterns of discrimination and social segmentation in today’s European societies?

The contributors to this collection have for a long time in their own national, local and regional contexts and debates dealt with colonial legacies in contemporary Europe. They recognise and emphasise that the respective histories of Europe’s nation-states are *imperial* histories more than national ones, and that

this fact must be accounted for in intellectual inquiry and reflected in public life and discourse. Whereas the history of imperialism and colonialism has so far been addressed mostly by separate national discussions, this collection treats it as a shared European concern. In this sense, the book contributes to an emerging trans-European conversation involving several intellectual milieus, projects and publishing ventures.<sup>1</sup> The almost simultaneous emergence of several such efforts shows that a rethinking of Europe's past from its migrant and postcolonial margins is both long overdue and urgent. For, as mentioned, it stands in radical opposition to present-day austere histories and their emphasis on national, continental or ethnic identity.

*Austere Histories* differs from these related publications in its emphasis on the relation of economy and culture. It also puts greater stress on mechanisms of social and historical exclusion. We keep a persistent focus on how austerity, in prompting an adaptation or revision of the past, also consolidates its grip on Europe's present and future. As a book, and as a concept, *Austere Histories* thus situates itself at the intersection of at least three contemporary issues, cultural contexts and academic discussions: first, discussions on Europe's cultural memory and the precarious place of the colonial legacy in it; second, controversies on multiculturalism, racism, xenophobia and Europe's migration crises; third and finally, the debate on austerity as policy and as ideology.

In the rest of this introduction we will sketch the context and relevance of these perspectives, first by fleshing out the connections between austerity policy and what we call *austere histories*, by which we mean, as should be clear by now, the increased role of historical scholarship and popular history in processes of social, cultural and historical exclusion. Second, and as a way of introducing the contributions to this collection, we will assess the real stakes involved in such exclusions especially as concerns groups designated as minorities, migrants and (former) colonial subjects in Europe past and present, colonial and postcolonial. Finally, we discuss what may lie ahead as alternatives to those histories and sociological cases of austerity that are analysed in both breadth and detail and from a variety of different angles in the following chapters.

## **Social exclusion and the contest of colonial memories**

While there is much to support the general intuition that the current politics of austerity corresponds to a historiography of austerity, it is not easy to define what the latter actually is. A historiography of austerity? But which, then, are the criteria according to which a piece of history writing can be classified as being austere or marked by austerity? As we shall see, one's perspective on matters of definition will depend upon one's perception of exclusion, and hence also on the role of identity – the identity of communities, peoples, countries, states, ethnic groups, or the like – in the realm of historiography.

We should also observe that although it is easy to confirm, again, the intuition of some correlation between the exclusion generated by relentless austerity policies, on the one hand, and a narrowing and homogenizing scope of historical

imagination, on the other hand, it is not at all clear how that relation should be interpreted. These two processes are usually not related to one another as a cause to its effects. Were we to establish such a causal explanation, it would immediately be challenged by long-standing critiques against interpretations that treat cultural and intellectual tendencies as super-structural manifestations of transformations in the socioeconomic base. This is to say that austere history is not a mere expression of a global political economy organized according to the neo-liberal principles of fiscal restraint and budgetary discipline. That such economic policies have caused the slashing of welfare is possible to prove (Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Krugman, 2015). But it is far more difficult to demonstrate how economic austerity policy affects the presentation of history in, say, museums or textbooks in contemporary France, Germany, the United Kingdom or Sweden.

An interpretation of this latter relationship therefore requires consideration of the mediations at work within and between different levels and sectors of contemporary society. This is why we propose, as an indispensable methodological perspective, that attempts to engage with the relation of exclusionary processes in today's European societies to the redefinition of collective identities and boundaries in historical accounts of the past must start out with a serious reflection on the concept of historical mediation as such. Rather than connecting neo-liberal austerity policy to austere historiography by looking for causal relations, we thus suggest that both *mediate* one another, in the sense that they, in combination, show something that neither is able to reveal when considered separately or in sequence. The juxtaposition evoked by the subtitle of this book – ‘social exclusion and the contest of colonial memories’ – is thus less a causal relation than a dialectical one: by relating the two, we become capable of apprehending a more general shift that is under way. The coupling of policies of austerity to austere historiography would serve its purpose if it helps us identify, interpret and conceptualize an emerging social and cultural order, which may be that of a generalized or ‘perennial’ austerity, an apparatus of exclusion and inclusion whose true scope and range we may still be unable to fathom, but of which several of the following chapters offer a glimpse.

### *The ideology of austerity*

Let us start charting this process of mediation by considering first the economic notion austerity, sometimes referred to as fiscal conservatism. In this sense, which is the most common one, austerity has become a catch-all term for economic adjustments in times of real or expected deflation. These adjustments aim to restore market competitiveness by reducing, for instance, wages, prices and public spending, and they are most efficiently executed by simply cutting the state's budget, debts and deficits. As Mark Blyth (2013a: 2) explains, this strategy supposedly restores optimal conditions for investments and growth, ‘since the government will neither be “crowding-out” the market for investment by sucking up all the available capital through the issuance of debt, nor adding to the nation's already “too big” debt’.

It is by now well established that this recipe for economic recovery has been unsuccessful in most places where it has been tried, not only because it has generated enormous social polarisation, creating massive poverty at one end and unprecedented wealth for the few at the top, but also because it has no consistent record of creating the economic growth it pledges to deliver (IMF, 2012; Kuttner, 2013; Schafer and Streeck, 2013; Blyth, 2013a: 178–226; Sommers and Woolfson, 2014).

Yet, austerity persists, which indicates that austerity is not only a policy of fiscal conservatism, or a matter of economics in the strict sense. ‘Because there is such extensive opposition to the idea that economic “austerity” is the right approach’, Rebecca Bramall (2013: 2) states, ‘it is a rare commentator who does not recognize that the policy of austerity also has an ideological dimension’. Several economists and social scientists have thus inferred that the reason why austerity remains the guiding principle of European and Western politics and policy recommendations – despite the doctrine’s internal shortcomings and the social disintegration and human suffering it has caused – is less to do with the economy *per se* than with extra-economic factors and forces (Blyth, 2013b; Jabko, 2013; Thompson, 2013; Streeck, 2013; Peck, 2013). They tend to explain austerity’s persistence by the fact that political power has become too dependent on big banks and financial investors – a sector of the economy that over the past decades has supplied wealthy people with an almost infinite source of additional wealth. Austerity may thus be seen as an ideology that serves to protect such forms of wealth-procurement. Jeff Madrick (2012) puts it squarely: ‘Austerity is essentially about smaller government, and a small-government ideology means lower taxes and fewer regulations – a boon to big business, especially the finance industry, and the rich.’

Ideological power typically operates by persuasion, propaganda and media dissemination, for the purpose of implementing policy. This implies, importantly, that it operates through a range of emotional and affective appeals to people’s sense of identity, belonging and community. Even as austerity may be under way of being discarded as economic doctrine, it therefore retains traction as a ‘truth’ about welfare, class structure, human relations, society and the meaning of politics itself. It is precisely at this point that we can grasp ‘austerity’ as a form of mediation by which particular economic interests are transformed into a set of ideas – or an ideology – that appears to serve some general interest. This is also where we see, with Rebecca Bramall, that it ‘is vital to recognize that austerity is both an economic policy *and* a complex ideological phenomenon, to explore austerity’s cultural politics as well as its financial politics and to grasp the interpenetration of culture and economy’ (2013: 3). Mark Blyth employs stronger language to capture this ‘interpenetration’, or what should perhaps more properly be called austerity’s ideological mediation of economy and culture:

In sum, when those at the bottom are expected to pay disproportionately for a problem created by those at the top, and when those at the top actively