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The idea of austerity in British politics, 2003-13

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ABSTRACT

Employing a dataset of 1,843 think tank publications containing 37 million words, Computer-assisted Text Analysis (CATA) was used to examine the idea of austerity in British politics between 2003 and 2013. Theoretically, the article builds on the ideational turn in political research. However, in contrast to much ideational work which argues that ideas are important at times of crisis because they can address uncertainty, this article argues that moments of crisis can lead to the reformulation of ideas. Empirically, this article demonstrates the transformation of the idea of austerity. Prior to the 2008 financial crisis, austerity was largely understood either in historical terms or as a practice applied in other countries. In the aftermath of the crisis, both the political right and left attempted to co-opt the idea of austerity for their own ends, combining it with various other ideational strands on which they have historically drawn.

It was David Cameron, then leader of the Conservative opposition, who argued that the UK was entering an 'age of austerity' following the 2007/08 financial crisis (Cameron, 2009). In the years since, British political debate seems to have become polarized between a pro-austerity right and an anti-austerity left, with senior figures in the Labour Party arguing that the Conservative austerity programme was ineffective and harming the most disadvantaged in society (Darling, 2011, p. 309). This polarization seemingly culminated in 2015, when new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn defined his party as 'anti-austerity' (Corbyn, 2015). Polarization is rarely this neat, however. The aim of this article is to better understand the idea of austerity in British politics, how it rose to prominence, how it is used across the political spectrum, and how it relates to other ideas.

While ideas have long played a role in the study of politics, especially for those employing historical methods (such as Barker, 1978; Freeden, 1978), recent years have seen growing prominence for various analytical approaches that overtly try to use ideas as a counterpoint to more positivist traditions. This development has gone under several names, including the ideational turn (Blyth, 1997), discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), interpretivism (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, chapter 2) and constructivism (Hay, 2006), as well as the study of paradigms (Hall, 1993), discourses (Hajer, 1993; Schmidt, 2001), narratives (Bacon, 2012; Boswell, 2013; Miskimmon et al., 2014), agenda setting (Kingdon, 2014), and framing (Fischer, 2003; Boin et al., 2009). These approaches share the view that *ideas matter* for understanding political phenomena. Building on this body of work, this study examines the evolution of the idea of austerity, drawing on a dataset of think tank publications from 2003 to 2013. This dataset offers a powerful tool for understanding the evolving ideational landscape.

This article proceeds as follows. First, a theoretical section examines the claim that ideas matter in political life and why this approach has proved to be particularly useful for the research of financial crises. Second, the data and methods section discusses the value and limitations of think tank publications as a resource for ideational research, as well as describing the Computer-assisted Text

Analysis (CATA) procedure. The empirical section follows. Finally, a short conclusion examines the empirical and theoretical ramifications of this article's findings.

THEORIZING THE ROLE OF IDEAS IN POLITICAL LIFE

A full review of the arguments made in the now extensive range of ideational literature is beyond the scope of this article (for the best article-length summary, see Schmidt, 2008). However, to operationalize the ideational approach of this study, it is worth making a few observations about the arguments made in contemporary ideational literature.

There are broadly two answers to the question of why ideas matter, differentiated by whether they are treated as being causational or constitutive (Gofas and Hay, 2010, pp. 4-6). The causational mode treats ideas as being explanatory variables, as traditionally understood. However, this approach is problematic, as it can lead to ideas being used as explanatory bridging devices, employed only when other approaches to analysis fail (Blyth, 2002, p. 17). Also, the causational approach has important definitional implications for what constitutes an idea, necessitating that they are discrete and clearly identifiable. These difficulties have led to the alternative constitutive approach, wherein 'ideas provide the discursive conditions of possibility of a social or political event, behaviour or effect' (Gofas and Hay, 2010, p. 4).

A constitutive approach recognizes that ideas can be employed in different ways by different types of political actors to communicate with different audiences at different times. One important distinction is between ideas that are technical, offering policy prescriptions, and those that are normative expressions of values (Schmidt, 2008, p. 306). These types of ideas are not wholly discrete, however. While more technical discussions may largely be the preserve of policy-makers, public opinion research suggests that elite opinion can also have an impact on the wider public (Zaller, 1992, pp. 13-22; Art, 2005, ebook location 340–67).

There is also a growing recognition that ideas are unstable (Carstensen, 2011, pp. 597–602). Kingdon (2014, chapter 6) talks about the ideational 'primeval soup' from which policy emerges, through a continual process of recombination. Bevir and Rhodes, writing in the interpretivist tradition, argue that ideas evolve in response to changes in the political world. Significantly, they also argue that an idea cannot exist in isolation, but instead is constructed through its interrelationship with other ideas. New ideas need to be integrated into existing ideational frameworks, but this is only possible when they are thematically consistent with that framework (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, pp. 32 and 37; see also Bevir, 1999, pp. 213–18). Indeed, it is this malleability that makes ideas so important to political life, as they can bind together coalitions of actors with a range of different interests (Béland and Cox, 2015, pp. 429–32).

The trend towards ideational analysis is especially evident in discussions of economic crises. Research has examined both historic events (Hall, 1989; Hay, 1996; Blyth, 2002) and the contemporary Great Recession (Blyth, 2013; Schmidt, 2014). That ideas have played a significant role in the analysis of such events is hardly surprising, for two reasons. First, by undermining existing policy paradigms, crises generate uncertainty among policy-makers, opening a space for new ideas (Walsh, 2000, pp. 486–7; Blyth, 2002, pp. 8–10). Second – and because of uncertainty – crises inevitably generate ideational contestation about causes and responses (Hay, 1996, pp. 254–6). The 2008 financial crisis provides an example of this, being subject to several interpretations. Burnham (2011, p. 501), for example, argues that popular understanding of the crisis has metamorphosed through three stages, from a crisis in the banking sector, to a sovereign debt crisis caused by government-funded bank bail outs, and finally, to a crisis of excessive general government expenditure.

The debate surrounding austerity offers a particularly good example of some of the tendencies predicted in the ideational literature. First, austerity is both a technical and normative idea. At the technical level, austerity is the subject of debate among economists. Austere fiscal regimes have been justified in a number of ways: that too much public sector spending can 'crowd out' the private sector

and, as a result, cutting public spending can lead to private investment 'crowding in' (for a discussion of the idea of crowding out, see Carlson and Spencer, 1975, pp. 3–4; see also Giavazzi and Pagano, 1990, pp. 105–6); that high levels of government debt leads to 'debt intolerance' greatly increasing a government's borrowing costs (Reinhart and Rogoff, 2010, p. 23); and that high government spending is the product of political pressures and undermines the outcome that would be generated by an efficient market, necessitating cuts to restore equilibrium (Buchanan and Tutlock, 1962, pp. 269–80).

Other economists have rejected this analysis. While they might disagree on the precise prescriptions they recommend, neo-Keynesian economists are united in arguing that curtailing government spending in a downturn undermines economic demand (for the clearest post-financial crisis articulation of this view, see Krugman, 2012, especially pp. 211–16.). The data used by pro-austerity economists have also been attacked. Ireland in the 1980s, for example, is often used as a pro-austerity case study. However, this claim has been countered by arguing that the late 1980s Irish growth was driven by European Union (EU) membership rather than decreased government debt (Kinsella, 2012, pp. 233–4). Others have claimed that the case for austerity is built on a misunderstanding of the post-financial crisis fiscal situation, where high levels of debt were caused by the cost of bailing out the banking sector rather than excessive government expenditure (Blyth, 2013, pp. 44–7).

Beyond these economic arguments, austerity has a second life as a normative concept. For some, it is part of a broader ideological project, a 'regressive redistribution of the costs and risks of economic stagnation, deregulatory failure and financial overreach' (Peck, 2014, p. 19). Such readings see austerity as part of an ongoing neoliberal project (for more on the claimed ideological underpinning of austerity, see Cahill, 2011; Crouch, 2011). Austerity also has overtones of moral virtue, going back to Adam Smith's advocacy of financial parsimony (Blyth, 2013, pp. 109–11). Some commentators have found echoes of this in the 'moralizing, even sanctimonious register' used to discuss cuts in government spending (Hay, 2010, p. 395; see also Finlayson, 2010, pp. 24–7).

However, it is important to note that the history of the idea of austerity in the UK demonstrates mutation crossing different partisan and ideological traditions. Prior to 2008, austerity was most closely associated with the Labour governments of 1945 to 1951 and the country's economic difficulties following the Second World War (Kynaston, 2007, pp. 103–8). In the interwar years, too, periods marked by government spending cuts saw complex partisan alliances and divisions forming. In 1921, the Committee on National Expenditure (the so-called 'Geddes's Axe') was created by David Lloyd-George in response to electoral success achieved by a new political party, the Anti-Waste League. While the League itself was largely a creation of the Tory press, broader anti-waste rhetoric was employed by both Liberals and the Labour Party in this period, so spanned the political spectrum (McDonald, 1989, pp. 646–7). Later, during the Great Depression, the Labour government elected in 1929 split over whether to enact the recommendations of the May Report of 1931. These included large cuts in government spending to control the deficit. This split ultimately led to the expulsion of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald from Labour, and then a MacDonald-led Conservative-dominated national government imposing significant cuts in government spending (Williamson, 2003, pp. 267–73).

The preceding discussion suggests several research questions for better understanding the evolution of the idea of austerity, how it relates to other ideas, and how different interpretations of the idea reflect and shape both political division and alliance:

- *What are the temporal dimensions of discussion about austerity?* Answering this will give an insight into the prominence of the idea of austerity both before and after the financial crisis among left and right-leaning think tanks.

- *Is there a thematic difference between the political left and political right in their discussion of austerity?* How much is the seeming polarization around austerity reflected in different language used about the term? This will give an insight into how the left and right define austerity and respond to it.

- *Are different understandings of austerity evident within political factions?* As noted above, in times of crisis, ideas can play a role in forging coalitions. Addressing this question will offer some insights into how coalitions have coalesced around the concept of austerity, as well as some of the tensions that might exist.

DATA AND METHODS

This articles draws on a large dataset of publications produced by UK think tanks. There are several reasons why think tank publications can provide a useful data resource for understanding political ideas. First, Hayek famously described the intellectual community, which now includes think tanks, as 'second-hand dealers in ideas' (Cockett, 1995, p. 123). They do not undertake original research, but instead draw on a range of ideas created in other fields such as politics, academia and the media. While this might be construed as a criticism, it also casts think tanks as conduits through which political ideas from various sections of society flow. Characterizing their role in this way clearly adds value to studying their outputs. Second, and indicative of the link between think tanks and other fields of political activity, is the much commented-on movement of personnel between think tanks, party politics and government. The New Labour period saw several senior figures moving between think tanks, appointed government positions, the House of Commons and ministerial posts (Schlesinger, 2009, pp. 7–11). While not always looked upon favourably by those studying the area, this development undoubtedly shows the link between the think tank sector and political decision-makers. Finally, and echoing ideational theory, it has been argued that think tanks have the potential to be most significant at moments of crisis, when policy-makers are more likely to look for external solutions (Bentham, 2006, pp. 168–70; Pautz, 2013, pp. 369, 372). As such, the financial crisis of 2008 has created a potential window of opportunity for think tanks, making their outputs even more worthy of study.

It is also worth noting some of the limitations with using think tanks as a data resource, and how these might be responded to. First, it is possible to overstate the role of think tanks. Think tanks themselves are keen to claim that they have a high level of influence (see, for example, Adam Smith Institute, 1990). Some academic accounts also give them a significant role either in government (Hennessy, 1989, pp. 221–2; Schlesinger, 2009) or in major ideological changes in party politics (Desai, 1994; Cockett, 1995). However, it is very hard to measure any direct impact (Weidenbaum, 2010, p. 134), leading some to doubt the influence of think tanks (James, 1993, p. 514). That said, we cannot dismiss the role played by think tanks. Instead, it has been argued, we should look to understand their broader role in shaping the ideational climate in which politics takes place (Stone, 1996, pp. 684–5).

Second, think tanks can be criticized for being both socially and ideologically narrow. In some ways, this is the corollary to arguments about think tanks being embedded in the wider political system – *they are of the political elite*. It is certainly the case that think tanks tend to employ people from a relatively narrow range of universities (Ball and Exley, 2010, p. 161). Inevitably, any ideational study drawing on data created by a particular type of organization should be treated with care, as there may be different ideas in circulation in other political spaces. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that recent research has suggested that ideas from social movements and more radical political groups can circulate widely and cross over into more mainstream political discourse (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013, pp. 186–91).

GATHERING THE DATASET AND CODING THE SAMPLE

[Table 1: Complete dataset of UK think tank publications gathered for this study]

Addressing the research questions posed in this article requires studying think tanks with identifiable political orientations. This is more complex than it would first appear. Weaver (1989, pp. 564–8) sub-divides think tanks into three distinct types: 'universities without students', with a strongly academic ethos; contract-based research consultancies; and advocacy tanks that work to articulate an

ideological or partisan worldview. As is often the case, such neat typologies become less useful in the real world, where think tanks engage in a variety of work that cannot be neatly compartmentalized.

Twelve think tanks that were primarily known for their advocacy work were contacted directly with a request to access their publication archive. At this point, two think thanks were excluded because their archives where not organized or complete enough to generate a sizable sample over an extended period. The ten remaining think tanks suggested accessing their public archives available on their websites. While some think tanks had public archives stretching back to the 1990s, 2003 was chosen as the starting point for the study because, for many of the think tanks, this was when their archives became more complete. This start point also ensured a significant portion of the data pre-dated the financial crisis, a requirement of the research questions. This approach generated a collection of 1,843 publications published between 2003 and 2013, totalling nearly 37 million words (referred to as 'the dataset' throughout this article; the contents of the dataset are shown in Table 1). This is clearly not a perfect sampling strategy – think tanks, for example, might be able to edit their public publication list, omitting items that turn out to be inaccurate or politically embarrassing in the light of later events. Nevertheless, the size of the dataset and the method employed offset this risk to some extent. The CATA approach (detailed below) focuses on patterns of language use over time. Even if individual publications are unavailable, those patterns should remain evident.

The next step was to code the think tanks as being on the left or right. In some cases, this was relatively simple. The Fabian Society is an affiliate organization of the Labour Party, for instance (Fabian Society, 2014). Some cases are more ambiguous. Demos, for example, became closely associated with New Labour in the 1990s. At different times, the organization has positioned itself as either above partisan politics or as working across partisan boundaries (Bale, 1996, p.29; Demos, 2009). These complexities, however, do not preclude identifiable right and left-wing traditions existing in British politics, and these traditions provide, in the adjective employed by Barker, a 'serviceable' (1978, p. 2) way to categorize think tanks. This acknowledgement of broad political

traditions is reflected in the language employed in the coding, borrowed from Baker et al.'s (2013, p. 8) study of representations of Muslims in the UK press where newspapers were categorized as being right- or left-leaning. Additionally, the idea of a tradition is useful in allowing for different types of think tanks to co-exist on the left and right, because it can encompass organizations with very different approaches, methods and goals. Some think tanks are more technocratic and some more normative, for example, but they can still be considered part of the same tradition (indeed, this latter distinction becomes particularly evident in the answer to research question three, below).

From the dataset, every paragraph referencing 'austerity' was extracted (creating 'the sample'). This approach generated 650 gobbets of texts, totalling 63,210 words. The decision to sample in this way has important ramifications for the types of claims that can be made based on its analysis. One limitation is the exclusion of discussions of austerity-type policies that do not feature the word 'austerity'. While this should certainly be acknowledged, the sample gathered does still provide an extensive window into both left- and right-leaning think tanks (481 and 169 items respectively) that will allow for the discussion of austerity to be situated in relation to other concepts.

Finally, the sample was coded using the variables needed to address the research questions. These included the publishing think tank and year of publication.

METHODS FOR ANALYSIS

These data were then analysed using a variety of CATA techniques, employing the software package T-Lab (2014; see also Lancia, 2012, for a discussion of the tool's capabilities). CATA refers to a family of methods wedding statistical analysis of texts with interpretative techniques (for overviews, see Kelle and Bird, 1995; Popping, 2000). These methods sit at the junction between quantitative and qualitative approaches, making them ideal tools for ideational research, partially because the study of ideas lends itself to methodological pluralism (Bevir and Rhodes, 2005, p. 178), but also because such research has been accused of failing to match theoretical advances with similar empirical developments (Kangas et al., 2014, p. 74).

To address the first research question (*What are the temporal dimensions of discussion about austerity?*), the relative frequency of the word 'austerity' through the dataset is calculated, and then compared between left- and right-leaning think tanks. To address the second research question (*Is there a thematic difference between the political left and political right in their discussion of austerity?*), a corpus analysis compared the language used in the sample with a subset of the sample. Subsets were created by combining two variables – the political leaning of the think tank responsible for publication, and the year of publication. A chi-square test was used to test for significance and to rank words that appear most disproportionately in the subset, relative to their appearance in the overall sample (see Baron et al., 2009, pp. 3–4 for a discussion of the history of the use of chi-square tests in corpus linguistic analysis; for a broader overview of the method, see Baker, 2006). The third research question (*Are different understandings of austerity evident within political factions?*) employs a correspondence analysis. This multivariate method converts a matrix of data (in this case, the appearance of a word and variables across the 650 gobbets of text mentioning austerity) into a graphical form, with the first axis (normally represented as the x-axis) showing the maximum possible proportion of association (often referred to in correspondence analysis as 'inertia'), and the second axis showing the maximum remaining level of association that can be displayed, and so on (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2008, p. 403).[1] In practice this means that words and variables with 'similar distributions will be represented as points that are close in space, and categories that have very dissimilar distributions will be positioned far apart' (Clausen, 1998, p. 2). (Clausen, 1998, provides a relatively non-technical introduction to correspondence analysis. For a more detailed discussion of the method, see Greenacre, 2010. For examples of the use of correspondence analysis in political science, see Schonhardt-Bailey, 2005, 2008.) It is important to note that the axes have no pre-defined significance (and as such, are labelled as x and y in figures). The challenge for researchers is to understand the meaning of the axes using existing theory. This interpretative element is the great strength of correspondence analysis, as it has the power to reveal the underlying structure of the data.

It should be noted that these methods are not wholly automated. Keyword in Context Tools (KWIC) allows the researcher to examine interesting patterns more closely. This type of deep reading of the text is important especially because T-Lab lemmatizes words. This means that inflected forms of a word are grouped together. While this is generally useful for analysis, it can create potentially confusing results (see endnote 4 for an example). The overall analytical procedure used in this study is summarized in Table 2.

[Table 2: Analytical procedure employed in this study]

DATA ANALYSIS

Figure 1 shows the number of mentions of austerity in the dataset per year. Unsurprisingly, austerity becomes a far more common point of discussion after the financial crisis, with the number of mentions increasing every year. It is notable that this increase is predominantly driven by left-leaning think tanks. Evidence for this trend is provided in Figure 2, which shows the number of mentions of austerity per 100,000 words in the dataset, sub-divided by left- and right-leaning think tanks. Only in 2010, the year of a general election, did references to austerity come close to parity (1.595 mentions per 100k words on the left, 1.209 on the right). This might suggest that, at that point in our sample period at least, discussion of austerity was seen to serve some useful purposes for the political right, particularly to claim that the incumbent Labour government had engaged in excessive spending. In contrast, in the years after the election, discussion of austerity on the political left increases much more rapidly.

[Figure 1: Overall number of mentions of austerity by left- and right-leaning think tanks, 2003–13]

[Figure 2: Mentions of austerity per 100k words published by left- and right-leaning think tanks, 2003–13]

It should also be noted that discussion of austerity is not absent from the period prior to 2008 – there were 23 references between the beginning of 2003 and the end of 2008. Contrasting this with the post-financial crisis pattern, it is interesting to note that right-leaning think tanks were marginally more likely to use the term in the earlier period. Most often, it was linked to specific historic situations such as the post-1945 Labour government:

> Both during and after the Second World War, the left brilliantly espoused a political economy of austerity and sacrifice in a centralised war-time state. (Reid, 2005, p. 67)

Far less common are characterizations of austerity as a right-wing ideological disposition. In the whole period analysed before the financial crisis, this only happens once:

> The central pillars of neo-liberalism – market liberalisation, privatisation, budgetary austerity – are only useful if they translate into equitable and sustained economic growth. How each of these policies, and other aspects of liberalisation, are managed in practice determines overall growth and poverty outcomes. (Cooksey, 2004, p. 51)

This quote is hardly a full-throated defence of neoliberal austerity. It focuses on international development rather than the UK economy. Furthermore, the argument is for restraint: while austerity is a 'central pillar' of neoliberalism, precisely how it is deployed is hugely important to successful policy outcomes.

This first stage of the analysis points towards an evolution of the idea of austerity. Before the financial crisis, the term is used by both left- and right-leaning think tanks. Furthermore, it is employed in diverse ways. In contrast, following the financial crisis – and despite the concept of the 'age of austerity' coming from David Cameron – austerity appears to have become a greater pre-occupation among left-leaning think tanks, that are far more likely to use the term than their right-leaning counterparts. This is especially true after the formation of the Cameron-led coalition government in 2010. This is a significant development, suggesting that the term was re-introduced to the British

political lexicon by the right, but was, in only a few years, co-opted by the political left, with an attempt being made to repurpose it as a critique.[2]

The next stage of the analysis, employing a corpus linguistic analysis, provides further evidence of the left's attempt to employ austerity as a term of critique. The results are shown in Table 3.

[Table 3: Corpus analysis of right- and left-leaning think tanks, 2003–13]

Left-leaning think tanks often discuss austerity through the prism of electoral politics (both 'Labour' and 'party' feature in their most typical post-financial crisis words). This is not entirely unexpected. In the years after the financial crisis, Labour was either an embattled government preparing for an election or in opposition. Similarly, left-leaning think tanks reflect the values and concerns of the broader political left ('social' in the post-crisis period, 'health', 'inequality' and 'welfare' in 2013, and 'disable' in 2010). Also evident are efforts by left-leaning think tanks to define their ideas against the concept of austerity (for example, 'investment', 'change' and 'alternative' in the overall post-crisis period), suggesting an attempt to develop a distinctive response to the financial situation and austerity. For example:

> There is now a considerable danger that productive social investment strategies will be significantly reduced under conditions of austerity. There is compelling evidence that shifting expenditures towards "growth-orientated policies" … will help to build up long-term human capital and innovative capacity. (Diamond and Lodge, 2013, p. 13)

> [P]olitics is about choices and Labour would itself need to provide a credible alternative that was not simply its own version of a "Plan B" for the economy. (Beer, 2011, p. 17)

This analysis leads to two observations about discussions of austerity on the political left. First, it involves a distinctive definition of crisis. Among left-leaning think tanks, rather than being a debt crisis, or even a global financial crisis, it seems that austerity and its consequences are increasingly

seen as a crisis in its own right. Second (and particularly evident in the quotes above), is a belief that the financial crisis and austerity policies have created an opportunity for a fundamental shift in values.

Right-leaning think tanks have also developed their own vocabulary for discussing austerity. Predictably, debt features highly (in the post-crisis period), while other economic terms are also evident ('GDP' in 2012, 'wage' and 'employer' in 2010). These words are used to construct an argument in favour of curtailing national debt. For example:

> Going forward, if the government acknowledges its true debt level, it will have to behave as any highly indebted person, institution or government does. (Silver, 2010, p. 17)

> The ratio of public sector net debt to GDP is projected to continue to rise, to 69% of GDP in 2015–16. Thereafter, the austerity measures agreed to 2017 could eliminate the national debt by around 2050. (Johnson, 2012, p. 3)

These arguments essentially reiterate David Cameron's original statement (2009) about austerity, especially the claim that the levels of government spending that developed under the pre-2010 Labour administration were unsustainable and needed to be curtailed.

This is not the whole story, however. Discussions about austerity on the political right reveal a cocktail of concerns. Words linked to Europe are very prominent ('German', 'Germany', 'Greek' and 'European' in the post-crisis period). It might be assumed, given the right's pre-occupation with national debt, that such terms were used to argue for debt aversion, but this is not the case. The Greeks' situation is treated with some sympathy, portrayed as a product of the flawed European project and German dominance. For example:

> *Greek* complaints about the tone and the severity of the German Diktat, which envisioned tax rises, deep cuts in public spending and selling of national assets as a price for financial aid, were dismissed out of hand by Berlin…. German leaders remain adamant about the fulfilment of the austerity measures. (Harris-Quinney and Scholer, 2011, p. 14)

> [T]he austerity of Thatcherite economics counted for nothing compared to the dogmatism
> and blinkered ideology of the EU. (Oborne and Weaver, 2011, p. 63)

Sympathy with the economic plight of Greece does not necessarily suggest that right-leaning think tanks are opposed to austerity measures in the UK, but it does indicate that discussion of austerity is far from monolithic. In this case, economic arguments in favour of austerity are trumped by the right's pre-occupation with the EU. While anyone familiar with recent British political history and the Conservative Party's divisions about the EU will not be surprised (for a detailed account of these conflicts, see Bale, 2010), it undermines the idea that the right-leaning think tanks have a fundamental and unbending belief in an austerity agenda to the exclusion of other issues.

A third strand of discussion among right-leaning think tanks concerns the traditional conservative desire to preserve societal stability at times of economic crisis. 'Stability' is one of the distinctive words in the right-leaning think tank sample post-crisis (as is 'police'; 'crime' also appears in 2013). This reflects a different and recurring strand of conservative thought, fearful of the disorder that might be created by economic dislocation. For example:

> "Doing more with less" has become a mantra for senior police leaders as they seek to reform
> their *police* forces as part of a broader response to reduced public sector spending. (Innes,
> 2013, p. 12)

> After one of the warmest summers on record, and austerity tightening its hold on the *police*,
> partners and people's pockets, we are faced with the very real prospect that *crime* may be on
> the rise again. (Mulligan, 2013, p. 24)

The linking of the economic doctrine of austerity with a desire for a strong state should be no surprise. Scholarship on Thatcherite conservatism in the 1980s noted that, while wedded to free market ideology, it retained a desire to preserve the coercive power of the state (Hall, 1983, pp. 36–9; Gamble, 1988, pp. 31–7, 54–61). Recent commentary on the coalition government's austerity policies

argues that it also draws on concerns about law and order at times of economic crisis (Clarke and Newman, 2012, pp. 12–13).

The corpus analysis offers some insights into ideas that are fuelling the debate about austerity. Correspondence analysis will point towards how these constellations of ideas relate to each other, forging coalitions and creating divisions.

[Figure 3: Correspondence analysis of left-leaning think tanks]

The correspondence analysis of the left-leaning think tanks (shown in Figure 3) suggests three clusters of language use. Along the x-axis (association = 38.81%[3]), it is possible to identify two distinct clusters. On the upper left of the diagram are words that are party political (for example, 'Miliband', 'Osborne', 'Labour', 'Tory', 'Party' and 'coalition') or which relate to relatively broad 'state of the nation' economic discussions ('debt', 'economy', 'GDP', 'growth' and 'spending'). It is notable that the think tanks clustered in this area are, in various ways, the most interested in progressive political strategy (Compass, the Fabians and Progress). The cluster to the right of the x-axis is different, reflecting a much clearer anti-austerity agenda. Not only does it focus on the more traditional concerns of the political left ('benefit', 'health', 'inequality', 'NHS' and 'welfare'), but it also references more direct forms of action ('protests', and some examples of 'demo' and 'march'[4]). Two things are notable about the use of these words. First, they seem to be in particular proximity to discussions about disability, reflecting a critique that austerity policies have most harshly affected people with disabilities, especially the phasing out of the Disability Living Allowance from 2013 (O'Hara, 2014, ebook location 3236–315). Second, it is worth noting how far removed these discussions are from more mainstream talk about electoral politics. The y-axis (association = 28%) suggests a third cluster of discussion among left-leaning think tanks that is more technocratic, focusing on formal economics ('analysis', 'capitalism', 'institutional', 'investor' and 'policy-maker'). It is noticeable that the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research), arguably the most important left-leaning think tank in the UK, sits in this technocratic cluster.

This analysis points towards two intriguing speculations. First, it is notable how discussions of party political strategy (upper left cluster) are far removed from either values-based concerns (right cluster) or technocratic policy development (bottom cluster). This suggests that neither the left's critique of austerity nor its policy development process was closely wedded with political strategy, possibly pointing to some of the weaknesses in the Labour Party's 2015 election campaign (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015, ebook location 1881–2478). Second, the estrangement between mainstream political rhetoric, values and more direct forms of political action could be interpreted as a pre-cursor to the rise of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader and the re-invention of the Labour Party on an anti-austerity platform following the 2015 election.

[Figure 4: Correspondence analysis of right-leaning think tanks]

Right-leaning think tanks' language also appears to divide into three clusters (shown in Figure 4). While four of the think tanks sit at roughly the same point on the x-axis (association = 36.53%[5]), the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is far removed. This reflects the CSJ's distinctive agenda, focused on social exclusion and poverty (highlighted in the appearance of words such as 'breakdown', 'dependency', 'poverty', 'social' and 'society' near the CSJ). Another interesting facet of this cluster is verb use, with the notable appearance of very active and combative words ('challenge', 'confront', 'secure' and 'tackle'). This cluster of words therefore seems to reflect a much more interventionist strand of conservative thought, less enamoured with outcomes created by the free market (Dorey, 2011, pp. 11–14).

The y-axis (association = 25.14%) moves from language related to applied policy questions at the top of the axis ('police', 'reduction', 'school', 'service' and 'value') to more formal macro-economic analysis and economic management issues at the bottom of the axis ('fiscal', 'framework', 'monetary' and 'stimulus'). The former group is clustered around the Policy Exchange (labelled as PolEx), an organization claimed to be David Cameron's favourite think tank (Bright, 2006). It is also associated with words relating to reforming public services ('efficiency' and 'local'). In contrast, the latter group

is more closely associated with the Institute of Economic Affairs, the think tank most associated with Thatcherism (Denham and Garnett, 1998, pp. 3–5). It is also notable that words relating to Europe appear in this cluster ('ECB', 'EMU', 'EU', 'European' and 'German'). None of the three clusters is in any way incompatible with the pursuit of austerity policies. Nor, however, are they inherently aligned with each other, suggesting the possibility of tensions on the political right. Arguably, such tensions were evident in the resignation of Iain Duncan-Smith, Secretary of State for Works and Pension and founder of the CSJ, from the Cabinet in March 2016 (on the claimed grounds of objecting to continuing government spending cuts), and in Conservative divisions during and after the referendum on the UK's EU membership in June 2016. These events could be understand as part of a process where different ideas are peeled away from the austerity project.

CONCLUSION

The arguments made in this article have ramifications for ideational theory. Crisis, and the role that ideas play at such moments, have been of interest to researchers. This is because crisis events provide the opportunity for ideational contestation and for new ideas to fill the vacuum left by pre-crisis policies that are deemed to have failed. Conversely, however, it is also important to examine the impact that a crisis can have on ideas. Austerity provides an example of this process, which occurred in three stages. Prior to 2008, austerity was largely discussed as either from the past or something that happened in other countries (especially economically less developed countries). In the second stage, the political right attempted to co-opt the idea of austerity, to attack the Labour government. Finally, the political left attempted to redefine the economic crisis as caused by austerity, to critique the coalition government.

Both positions were syntheses of various ideational strands on the right and left. While the post-financial crisis debate about austerity in the UK may seemingly be polarized between a pro-austerity right and an anti-austerity left, the analysis in this article suggests there is scope for a more nuanced

reading, as neither the left nor the right is homogenous in its use of the term. The language of right-leaning think tanks does not just focus on national debt or the size of the state, but also on more long-standing ideological concerns, such as law and order, and the EU. On the left, too, divisions are evident between discussions about party and electoral politics, a more values-based approach focused on traditional concerns, and a more technocratic tendency.

This article has examined how ideas are used by different political actors over time, and how the idea of austerity is related to other ideas. What it has not done is addressed how ideas co-exist with other objects of political analysis. One question raised by ideational research is how ideas relate to the material world (Schmidt, 2008, p. 318). For example, in the context of the topic addressed by this article, the extent to which the UK has practised austerity policies has been questioned, with it being argued that any serious attempt to cut state spending ceased in 2012 in response to government unpopularity (Clarke et al., 2015, pp. 43–4). This does not mean we can write off the idea of austerity as irrelevant, however. Indeed, ideas like austerity may be more powerful precisely because they exist as rhetoric and not as precisely defined policy prescriptions (Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013, ebook location 769–806). This might explain why discussion and disagreement about austerity has been so virulent since the financial crisis, and why alternative ideational paradigms have failed to make a significant breakthrough, despite the clear evidence presented in this article that at least some left-leaning think tanks believed there was an opportunity for such a paradigm shift.

This leads to the broader question of exactly how ideas relate to power. It might be argued that discussions of power greatly downgrade the role of ideas in politics, making them little more than window dressing for political actors seeking their rational self-interest (Shapiro, 1999, pp. 28–38) or for dominant political structures (Gramsci, 1992, pp. 144–7). Ideational scholars have attempted to meet these challenges, arguing that we need to understand the interrelationship between power and ideas, rather than just dismissing the latter as subservient to the former (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2015). In the context of discussions about austerity, these debates raise questions about how ideas

are disseminated, and about the role played by powerful actors and institutions – especially in

government and the media – in shaping public understanding. The greatest challenge for ideational

research going forward is therefore to offer a theoretically grounded and empirically convincing

synthesis of the role of ideas in political life.

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[1] Correspondence analysis can be interpreted in three or more dimensions, although this study does not attempt this. The levels of association achieved with two dimensions in this article are comparable to other studies (see, for example, Schonhardt-Bailey, 2005; Schonhardt-Bailey et al., 2012).

[2] As detailed in the methods sections, this study looks at explicit references to austerity, which raises the important question of whether the greater discussion of austerity on the left is indicative of the right employing an alternative euphemism. The results are somewhat ambiguous for some of the possible alternatives. Post-crisis deficit appears more on the left (14.6 times per 100k words) than the right (10.7 times). National debt is certainly used more by the right (2.26 times per 100k words post crisis) than the left (0.44 times). Insights into how these terms related to broader discussions of austerity are evident in the correspondence analysis carried out to address research question three.

[3] The correspondence analysis of left-leaning think tanks produced four axes. Axis 3 (19.9% of association) and axis 4 (13.3% of association) are not discussed in this article.

[4] Analysing some of these words is complicated by double meanings and the lemmatization process. While 'protest' is unambiguous, 'march'/'March' appears in the dataset as both a verb and a month. 'Demo' can mean a protest, but it is also the lemma of demonstrate (as in 'to show', democracy and Demos, the think tank).

[5] The correspondence analysis of right-leaning think tanks produced four axes. Axis 3 (20.8% of association) and axis 4 (17.5% of association) are not discussed in this article.

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Table 1: Complete Dataset of UK think tank publications gathered for this study

Political orientation	Think tank name	Number of publications (number of '000 words in parenthesis)											
		Year											
		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Left-leaning	**Compass**	0	1	2	8	1	4	12	9	10	6	6	59
		(0k)	(8k)	(44.47k)	(205.64k)	(31.17k)	(88.73k)	(182.59k)	(82.37k)	(188.21k)	(33.69k)	(42.16k)	(907.04k)
	Demos	15	28	23	29	21	21	28	24	36	39	30	294
		(357.91k)	(577.02k)	(476.22k)	(610.35k)	(465.38k)	(530.58k)	(495.25k)	(764.91k)	(1087.29k)	(1105.41k)	(678.35k)	(7148.67k)
	Fabians	4	3	5	4	7	4	6	8	5	18	17	81
		(77.3k)	(48.76k)	(105.05k)	(44.29k)	(97.46k)	(68.14k)	(144.27k)	(200.45k)	(132.51k)	(276.87k)	(294.81k)	(1489.90k)
	IPPR	28	33	36	54	41	30	49	65	67	63	70	536
		(651.67k)	(587.28k)	(684.72k)	(1111.10k)	(620.93k)	(696.31k)	(843.37k)	(707.97k)	(965.02k)	(1097.25k)	(1307.31k)	(9272.31k)
	Progress	0	0	0	0	0	10	3	0	3	3	3	22
		(0k)	(0k)	(0k)	(0k)	(0k)	(65.12k)	(22.88k)	(0k)	(116.33k)	(32.40k)	(31.21k)	(268k)
Left total		47	65	66	95	70	69	98	106	121	129	126	**992**
		(1086.88k)	(1221.06k)	(1310.45k)	(1971.36k)	(1214.93k)	(1448.94k)	(1688.36k)	(1755.69k)	(2489.36k)	(2545.61k)	(2353.84k)	**(19086.51k)**
Right-leaning	**Bow Group**	2	4	5	4	1	3	4	6	16	6	3	54
		(19.58k)	(97.29k)	(140.33k)	(26.74k)	(10.45k)	(18.01k)	(54.41k)	(113.16k)	(162.7k)	(45.02k)	(13.31k)	(700.99k)
	Centre for Policy Studies	14	22	26	24	22	18	24	14	18	27	17	226
		(207.66k)	(309.08k)	(228.16k)	(223.12k)	(176.34k)	(145.2k)	(257.28k)	(173.79k)	(177.31k)	(253.28k)	(153.08k)	(2304.3k)
	Centre for Social Justice	0	0	2	7	12	9	9	10	15	16	20	100
		(0k)	(0k)	(62.49k)	(355.87k)	(264.61k)	(349.54k)	(625.73k)	(190.29k)	(425.56k)	(236.07k)	(562.49k)	(3072.65k)
	Institute of Economic Affairs	15	15	21	12	23	17	14	17	11	20	20	185
		(250.21k)	(509.52k)	(524.79k)	(267.66k)	(888.72k)	(582.68k)	(543.56k)	(331.07k)	(256.63k)	(386.27k)	(407.51k)	(4948.61k)
	Policy Exchange	6	6	9	10	14	34	44	60	33	36	34	286
		(177.76k)	(143.74k)	(202.53k)	(266k)	(339.4k)	(811.57k)	(955.35k)	(1424.21k)	(729.05k)	(756.05k)	(848.59k)	(6654.26k)
Right total		37	47	63	57	72	81	95	107	93	105	94	**851**
		(655.21k)	(1059.63k)	(1158.3k)	(1139.4k)	(1679.53k)	(1906.97k)	(2436.32k)	(2232.51k)	(1751.28k)	(1676.68k)	(1984.98k)	**(17680.82k)**
Overall total		84	112	129	152	142	150	193	213	214	234	220	**1843**
		(1742.09k)	(2280.68k)	(2468.75k)	(3110.78k)	(2894.46k)	(3355.93k)	(4124.68k)	(3988.2k)	(4240.64k)	(4222.29k)	(4338.82k)	**(36767.33k)**

*Table 2: Analytical Process Employed in this Study*

Stage	Activity
1	Develop research questions, based on existing literature
2	Analysis using computer-assisted text analysis techniques to understand relationship between language and coded variables: • Corpus analysis; • Correspondence analysis.
3	Interpret results of stage 2, develop possible explanations.
4	Assess value of explanations developed in stage 2 • Key-word-in-context tools (i.e. targetted manual reading).
5	Develop and refresh research questions, based on stages 2-4. Return to stage 2 and repeat process.

Figure 1: Overall number of mentions of austerity by left and right-leaning think tanks, 2003- 2013
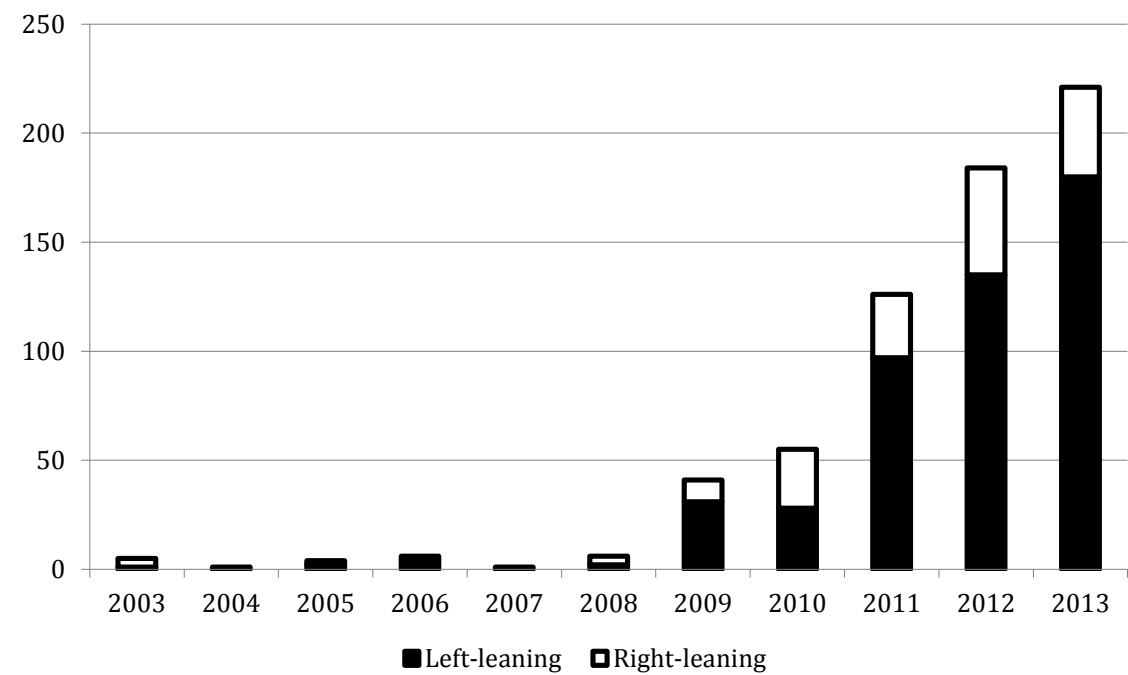
Based on analysis of 650 references to austerity in 1,843 think tank publications

Figure 2: Mentions of austerity per 100k words published by left and right-leaning think tanks, 2003-2013
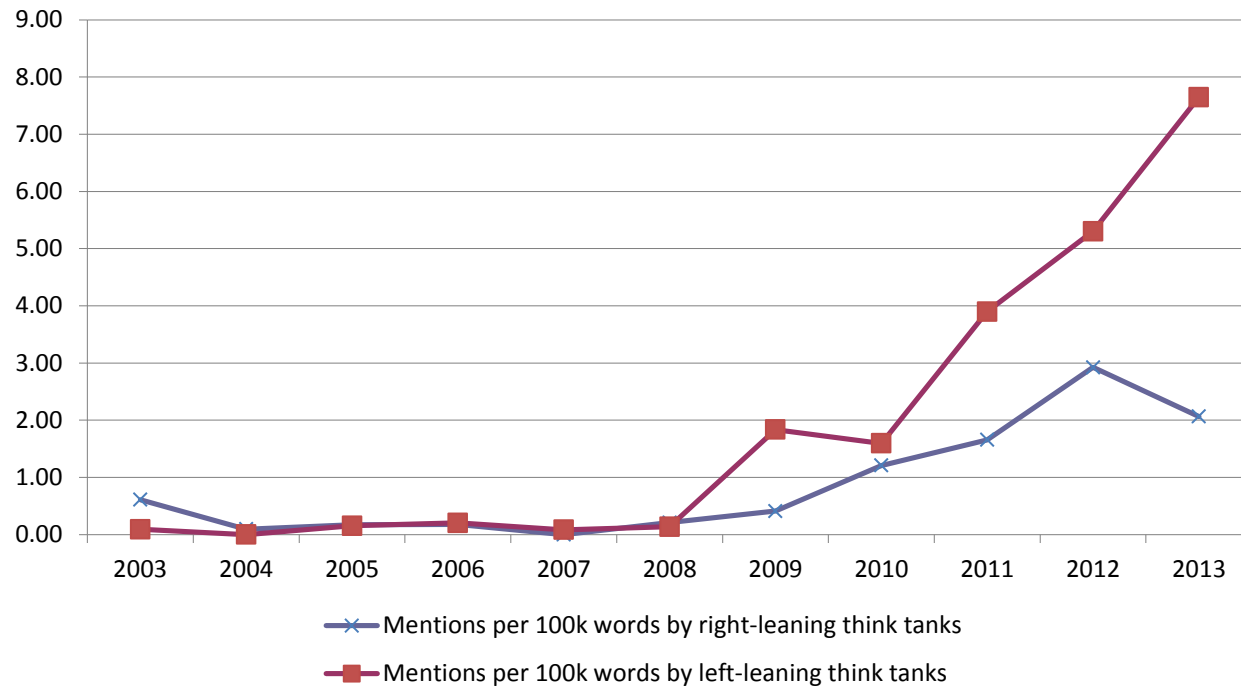
Based on analysis of 650 references to austerity in 1,843 think tank publications

Figure 3: Corpus analysis of right and left-leaning think tanks 2003–2013

		Pre-financial crisis (2003-2008)	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Overall post-crisis (2009-2013)
Left-leaning think tanks	1	monetary	progressive	disable	recovery	long-term	labour	labour
	2	euro	behaviour	cultural	happen	alternative	health	per_cent
	3	model	school	individual	credible	people	inequality	House
	4	control	demo	operate	Eurozone	debate	multiplier	investment
	5	EU	era	personal	lack	impact	security	party
	6	employment	desire	industry	policymaker	Home	welfare	change
	7	international	billion	culture	Ireland	company	consider	business
	8	shift	rest	pay	stimulus	current	group	consider
	9	gain	opportunity	people	risk	idea	afford	Social
	10	associate	save	job	apply	argument	protest	alternative
Right-leaning think tanks	1	ability	patient	wage	German	GDP	Police	German
	2	efficiency	commission	rapidly	European	debt	incentive	Police
	3	play	limit	employer	Greek	long	crime	stability
	4	option	ensure	Union	ECB	Cameron	framework	Germany
	5	council	programme	achieve	March	Police	poverty	package
	6	paper	government	combination	permanent	success	mechanism	Greek
	7	food	finance	improvement	Germany	write	secure	European
	8	powerful	Germany	outside	monetary	win	tackle	debt
	9	Miliband	terms	public_sector	loss	position	stability	once_again
	10	expect	unemployment	budget	package	seek	confront	patient

Note: Words ranked by their chi-square score and all have a p value = < 0.001.

Figure 4: Correspondence Analysis of Left-Leaning Think Tanks

X = Fact. 1 (38.81%) ; Y = Fact. 2 (28.00%)

Figure 5: Correspondence Analysis of Right-Leaning Think Tanks

X = Fact. 1 (36.53%) ; Y = Fact. 2 (25.14%)