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This is what austerity looks like

I travelled into the city after the cuts had been made. There were tourists on the train and people from other countries visiting their relatives. "What can I say?" the man opposite me shrugged, who was travelling from Germany to visit his daughter. "She fell in love, she's settled here now, it's a pity but she's still in love and has children, they speak the language, this is their home now."

The city was quiet, much quieter than I had seen it before. Last year I had seen people searching in bins for food for the first time here. They were probably foreigners. The foreigners always lose out first. However, this year there were far fewer visitors, far less food in the bins, this year was very different. I didn't see anyone searching in bins. Instead what I saw, all the time, was begging.

There was begging in the streets, begging on the underground, begging quietly in corners, begging a bit more forcibly, people standing in front of me for a minute just looking in my eyes. Not the kind of begging I was used to. A mother begged while breastfeeding her baby.

People gave money, but mostly the smallest of coins so those who were begging had to keep on begging, all day, just to get enough for a small meal. It was mostly older people giving to younger people and you knew that the older ones did not really have the money, that they would go hungry and cold for giving it.

The begging look was not just on the streets. Shopkeepers sat behind their glass fronts willing the few tourists there were to come into their premises. Most shops were empty almost all of the time but what else to do but sit and wait? There is no other way. Restaurants, even the most popular, were more than half empty. Again it is the tourists who have money and there are not enough of them. Locals don't appear to eat out much anymore.

The gas is being turned off in many apartment blocks. If you have a few savings you can pay to run an electric heater. It costs more, but this situation is not about efficiency, it is about the money running dry. When there are strikes they are no longer about people wanting more, but about people demanding to be paid for the work they have done. They blockade until they are paid.

Every day you hear stories of people taking what money they have out of the country, to somewhere safer. Every day you feel that it is all spiralling down a little further, that more of the young people who can are leaving, that there is less and less to go round, and for every note that isn't spent another person's spending also falls who would have got that note. People become more careful. Prices of what's left rise, rents don't fall as much as earnings, more and more are made homeless.

And what do the people say? Some say "go back and tell them that we are not lazy, that we can work hard", but many don't say much at all, they just look haggard and tired. Having the hope slowly kicked out of you by a multitude of events at first makes you angry, then you become resigned and next you become scared. What you thought could never happen is happening.

Athens, November 2011

Danny Dorling is professor of human geography at the University of Sheffield. He is the author of [Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists](#) and [Fair Play](#). Posted: 9:48am on 15 November 2011