feminism and the implications of austerity

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introduction

In January 2014, the UK’s Channel 4 broadcast a series entitled ‘Benefits Street’, which followed the lives of people living on benefits in a street in Birmingham. The programme attracted a great deal of controversy, and many of the people who took part voiced their concern about the ways in which their lives had been presented. Among the various remarks about the programme there was, however, one in particular that went beyond the usual tropes of discussion about those claiming benefits. An unnamed woman (not in any way involved in either making or appearing in the programme) commented in a televised interview about the programme that ‘a lot of us have always been poor. This austerity is just a continuation of what many people have always known’.

In saying this, that anonymous voice defined an aspect of contemporary debates in the UK about poverty, gender and inequality that is important, but seldom articulated, even though it has implications for the ways in which gendered inequality is discussed, not just in the UK but in other countries that are in the process of implementing ‘austerity’ policies. This does not imply, however, that the way in which these apparently essential ‘austerity’ regimes are being legitimated and managed is merely a continuation of existing policies (a view that might minimise if not dismiss the impact of current policies). But it does emphasise the extent to which the austerity regime has not suddenly ‘produced poverty’ but has intensified that situation. In particular, recent policies (as many people have argued) have imposed greater hardship on women, but it is a form of additional rather than novel hardship. If we speak of the poverty of women only as a phenomenon of the second decade of the twenty-first century we are writing out of history those millions of women (a significant proportion of the female population) for whom austerity has been everyday reality.
Indeed, to speak of austerity as a hitherto unknown form of female experience is to endorse implicitly a narrative of the exceptional circumstances of the present rather than to recognise the many economic ‘crises’ of the twentieth century. Agendas about austerity, common to much of Europe and the USA, are being written as if austerity (or ‘belt tightening’ as the materially privileged are fond of describing it) were some kind of aberrant event in the history of capitalism. This kind of advice is epitomised in those current (in 2014) comments by UK Cabinet Ministers whereby they speak of citizens having to learn to ‘manage’ on the levels of current or reduced benefits. Few voices from the political mainstream are raised to point out that ‘managing’ is always possible for the well-off, since they have considerable resources to draw on. It is a point that Orwell made in 1933 in Down and Out in Paris and London but that has apparently so far eluded the consciousness of many members of the political class (Orwell, 1963 [1933]: Chapter 3).

Thus, it is the ‘new’ form of ‘old’ poverty that is the context of this paper, the extension of existing forms of material inequality through various aspects of neo-liberal ideology, with a particular focus on the implications for women. The concern here is to consider some of the ways in which engagements between feminism and neo-liberalism are articulated—and developed—within ‘austerity’ politics. In this there are both the specific ways in which the policies of the Coalition Government impact upon women and the more complex instances where the emphasis on autonomy and individualism within neo-liberalism resonates with feminist demands for the autonomy of the female person, while at the same time aspects of feminism emphasise the collective situation of women and the need for collective action.

**the material world**

In all those countries where ‘austerity’ policies have been implemented one clear factor has emerged: that cuts in state spending and welfare benefits impact particularly forcefully on women, in that both the levels and scope of benefits and services of particular relevance to women are decreased, and that the opportunities for paid work and promotion to senior positions in the public sector generally held by women are reduced (see Trades Union Congress, 2012). This account of the relationship of women to the state, in which the dependence of women on forms of state support is often greater than that of men, cuts across those optimistic accounts of the history of women in the twentieth century (accounts that can be traced across the political and geographical spectrum) that argue that women in the Global North have been ‘emancipated’ and ‘given’ access to the same civil rights and employment as men. (The word ‘given’ in these accounts always suggests that sense of benign, graceful enlightenment that results in the handing over of rights to the less privileged, and in which struggles by the underprivileged are often
To write history in this way is itself an aspect of those neo-liberal narratives of history that identify and associate ‘freedom’ and ‘emancipation’ as embodied in ‘progress’ towards that perfect neo-liberal actor, the autonomous being entirely responsible for herself. Not only is this account of the history of women largely fanciful (in that women, more than men, are often those with ties to others involving significant commitments of unpaid care), it also obscures the facts of women’s long-term involvement in paid work, the changing locus and discourse of political power, and the evidence of gendered responsibilities that inhibit and constrain the part that women are able to take in paid work. This last factor—the association of women with care and caring—is one that remains a consistent presence in the construction of gendered forms of material inequality. The changing locus of power is that of the increasing influence of corporate capitalism and its independence from any of the political structures (local or national) where women play anything like a significant part. But as one study of UK politics noted, women were much more likely than men to be active in ‘single issue’ politics (e.g., the boycott of goods and services or issues particular to a local environment) rather than the collective (Electoral Commission, 2004), a difference that suggests a political focus at least in part related to immediate family and neighbourhood interests.

Documenting and challenging the consequences of the association of women with caring has been a long-standing aspect of feminist politics. But in the past twenty years, in which neo-liberalism has found for itself a secure place within the minds and policies of many governments of the Global North, an aspect of its many assumptions has been what can appear as encouragement for the greater ‘liberation’ of women. That aspect is best summed up as support for the ‘empowerment’ of women, a potential area for that much glorified ‘growth’ and ‘modernisation’ that is often the aspiration of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism, it is suggested, can offer women emancipation and a greater part (especially a more profitable part) in the social world. Women who have founded companies, achieved significant status in corporate hierarchies and become the new models for women; and conferences, pressure groups and personal stories about ‘getting on’ have all become a new form of the politics around gender, as have those accounts of women through film and other forms of the media that present the aspirational ideal of the feminine in terms of an urban, autonomous person (see Eisenstein, 2009; Wilson, 2013: 84–101).

Accounts, both fictional and otherwise, of the modern ‘entrepreneurial’ woman, are both derived from and feed into neo-liberal accounts of the ideal citizen. This person is not hampered by social or personal ties; their mission in life—in which the beliefs of John Calvin demonstrate their long-term energy—is to employ their talents to achieve material wealth. The ‘hard-working people’ so beloved of the UK Coalition Government are those people who have properly understood the ideal relationship of the citizen to the state: that it is the duty of the citizen to provide...
for themselves and to join with others only insofar as it is necessary to secure a reliable context in which to locate their work and its profits. One problem with this, as events since 2008 have shown, is that human values can include a commitment not only to hard work but also ruthless accumulation, the practice of which may have disastrous consequences in terms of increased unemployment, financial loss and instability. The second problem, as others have pointed out, is that ‘hard-working’ is often conflated with paid work. Unpaid care work has no place in this agenda.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that one of the political facts of the majority of countries in the Global North in the past ten years has been the gender gap in political affiliation that has been emerging between women and men. The citizen, it would appear, has not yet evolved into the ungendered citizen, but remains a person with different experiences and different political sympathies that are related to gender. If we take the example of the UK (at the time of writing still a state that includes Scotland), the support for the Labour Party among women is greater (by about 8 per cent) than it is among men. The policies of the present UK Coalition towards many state services so radically worsen the lives of so many women that the only surprise is that the figure is not higher. Elsewhere, similar patterns can be observed.2

the context of austerity

So ‘austerity’ policies impact women in negative ways. But from this I would like to suggest—in full acceptance of the argument that women are particularly disadvantaged by frantic neo-liberal policies to maintain the profitability of the capitalist organisation of labour—that there are a number of other issues for feminists to consider, which revolve around the relationship of women to the various and often contradictory values, expectations and aspirations through which we all form social and personal connections.

The initial point that should be made here is that it is apparent that in the UK in the second decade of the twenty-first century, women are divided by social class and racial difference in ways that are not dissimilar to those at the beginning of the twentieth century. Technological and social changes of various kinds (in public health and housing, greater access to education and increased life expectancy) have improved the conditions of life for all citizens, even as the relative experiences of various aspects of social life remain different across lines of class, race and gender (see Phoenix, 2009: 101–114; Reay et al., 2009: 1103–1121). For example, when patterns of growing social inequality are debated (as they increasingly are across the Global North), a closer look at these discussions would reveal two things. First, on many tables of educational attainment (the major form of social mobility across the Global North), women who gain access to higher

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2 There is now a recognition of the ‘gender gap’ in all aspects of politics and in particular of the dis-association of women from right-wing politics. For an overview of the gender voting gap in recent US politics, see Seib (2013); for the UK see Campbell (2013: 28–50) and for a global overview, Inglehart and Norris (2000: 441–463).
education do better in terms of formal examinations than men, until the completion of first degree studies. Second, women who do not go into higher education are more likely than men to acquire vocational qualifications. But entry to the world of paid work is the point at which men start to be more successful in terms of acquiring better paid and/or higher-status jobs (see the discussion of global evidence in Morrow and Fredrick, 2013). Even before the birth of children has had its impact on women’s employment it is transparently clear that the world of paid work (unlike that of the relatively more gender-neutral world of the examination hall) remains at the very least hesitant about the employment of women and appropriate rewards for them. Over thirty years ago the feminist economist Irene Breughel used Marx’s term ‘the reserve army of labour’ to theorise the ways in which contemporary capitalism employs women. At the present moment it is important to remember that a reserve army of labour is implicitly also a disposable army of labour (Breughel, 1979: 12–23).

The twist in this account is that just as much as the neo-liberal state may be prepared to dispose of many forms of public sector employment, what it cannot dispose of (without abandoning a foundational aspect of its ideology) is the moral imperative that insists that all citizens (however physically disadvantaged or whatever their responsibilities for care) should be in paid work. Having itself emerged from those lineages of the Protestant Reformation that insisted that paid work is a morally essential part of the life of every citizen, neo-liberalism is left with the conundrum of who will undertake unpaid care work. One way out of this is of course to re-invigorate those ‘return’ narratives that suggest that women should be the unpaid carers of children, the elderly and those simply unable to be autonomous. But this ‘return’ narrative is essentially one that is at odds with the modernising aspirations of contemporary neo-liberalism, in which differences of gender disappear. A curious, but important, coincidence arises here in the way in which neo-liberalism has the same expectations and hopes for the progress of capitalism as Marx and Engels: that eventually it would bring all its citizens into paid labour.

What Engels made of this was the optimistic prediction that the entry of women into paid work would fully socialise and politicise the proletariat. Perhaps understandably, this aspect of Marxism is seldom acknowledged in the temples of neo-liberalism since its consequence, as both Marx and Engels suggested, was greater political solidarity and political action among those to whom capitalism offers little (Engels, 1972 [1884]). There are, as suggested above, few indications that this is becoming evident. Hence, it is possible that the refusal of neo-liberal governments to ‘think gender’ will contribute to, if not the degree of instability and transformation within the capitalist state that some of us might fantasise about, then at least a situation in which the politics of gender will have to be discussed, not least because no state can function without unpaid care work. This point was made repeatedly by feminists in the 1980s (often in the context of debates about the meanings of ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ labour), but what has been
brought sharply into prominence in the present context are two questions. One of these is that of how a state will continue to meet the expectations of its citizens for various forms of care (in health, education and various other forms of need) without supporting those who provide that care. The second is how the market economy will secure consumers for itself at a time when for many people disposable income has radically diminished.

**The feminine and the feminist**

This takes the paper to a place where speculation about the links between feminism, neo-liberalism and gender becomes the dominant theme, through which I wish to explore three questions: of the meanings of the 'feminine' and of the 'feminist' in the twenty-first century, and the complexity of the narrative about women and austerity. The first issue, that of the meaning of the 'feminine', involves a willingness to consider some of those 'master's tools' of which Lorde (1984: 110–113) was so critical. For example, I want to use the work of Georg Simmel to suggest that the profitability of consumption within neo-liberalism is maintained through the continuation of gender and class difference, with clear and eminently definable definitions of both. Class differences are alive and well in much of the Global North, but it is also the case that the concept of the 'feminine' has an equal vitality and a central part in maintaining profitable delineations of the body, both dressed and undressed. Simmel, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, remarked that:

> Fashion is, as I have said, a product of class division and operates—like a number of other forms, honour especially—the double function of holding a given social circle together and at the same time closing it off from others. (Simmel, 1997: 189)

This aspect of the possibilities of the social closure implicit in fashion is important given that much is often made of the opposite view: that what is referred to as 'high street' fashion is in some sense more 'fashionable' than more expensive products. But if we combine this remark about fashion with another comment by Simmel, that in the modern world the rift between subjective and objective experience is becoming ever greater, what emerges is a picture in which, as the objective world of women becomes ever more problematic, our subjective world becomes ever more infused with false confidence and unrealisable aspirations. High street fashion provides access to the idea of fashion, but it does not provide access to that aspirational world of the person that is available to very few. In individual terms, what many women face is, on the one hand, a world without either paid work or the state provision that might make paid work possible, and on the other, a world that appears to offer the replication of forms of exclusivity. As social inequality deepens, so a writer such as Simmel suggests to us that in this situation the greater is the need for fantasies of incorporation and similarity between
materially divided groups. This also leads us to considerations of the ‘modern’, a world whose very aesthetic is deeply infused with the continuing transformation of both the situation of women and our endless transformation through fashion; being ‘old-fashioned’ signifies a failure to connect with the values of the present, and it is the appearance of women that is more susceptible to expectations of change than that of men.

That Britain as a nation has one of the highest rates of personal debt in the world attests perhaps not just to the costs of housing and utilities in the UK, but also to the successful sale of fantasies about ourselves that are based upon two of the social pillars of neo-liberalism: the idea that we are all ‘middle-class’ now, and that through this new social leavening we can all share in a culture that is derived from the habits and choices of the rich. In the UK, Thatcherism and New Labour, in their different ways, supported various forms of aspiration: to home ownership, higher education and ‘choice’ in the use of public services. The second and third of these aspirations allowed connections between socially progressive agendas and those of neo-liberalism; for example, the direct association and validation of higher education through value and reward in the marketplace allowed a specific product (a university degree) to acquire a defined form as a commodity. In the case of higher education in particular we can see the ways in which feminist aspirations for greater participation by women in higher education often obscured other questions about structural transformation. In terms of policies organised around ‘choice’ we see a weaving together of taken-for-granted assumptions about negative aspects of the ‘central’ state with the socially acceptable, feminine, practice of shopping. This suggests a further aspect of the feminisation of the discourse of politics, so marked in the UK since Margaret Thatcher set out her economic policies in terms of the thrifty housewife. Ironically, this very translation of the political into the domestic allows the absence of female politicians to be less marked: a feminised ‘voice’ of politics loses its specific attachment to women.

But the absence of women from formal politics—a phenomenon of much of the Global North, with the exception of Scandinavia—raises questions for the second issue here: that of the meaning and place of feminism in times of austerity. That poverty, and austerity politics, impacts disproportionately on women has been made clear by feminist groups, but such is the impact of neo-liberal politics that the term ‘feminist’ is no longer securely located within a politics of economic re-distribution and support for public services. As already suggested, feminism has also become associated with female entrepreneurs and the energetic validation of the private sector, not just through forms of employment, but also in terms of support for forms of private sector provision in health and education. What then becomes problematic is the definition of feminism, important not just in terms of political identity and recognition but also in terms of the third question here, that of the complexity of the narrative about women and austerity.
For some feminists, the narrative about austerity politics has close links to other social movements such as that of 'Occupy', in which the working of the capitalist state is the subject. Slogans such as 'We are the 99 per cent' are ungendered and dramatise the entirely accurate picture of the distribution of wealth in the Global North, that a great deal is owned by a very few. The politics of 'Occupy' have received support from across the world; Judith Butler, for example, spoke passionately in New York of the importance of 'asking the impossible'. That 'impossible' clearly involved economic re-distribution and a much greater extension of the state's provision for the care of its citizens. At least part of that message seems to have been heard by Bill de Blasio, elected as Mayor of New York city in 2013, who immediately committed his administration to policies to further social equality.

Away from these politics, formed spontaneously out of coalitions of various groups, are those innumerable organisations that have worked for decades for women and which have general programmes about gender inequality (e.g., in the UK, the Fawcett Society) and which are organised around more specific politics (e.g., the representation of women in the media). Collectively, most of these groups work as pressure groups and often have close connections with formal politics. In the feminist politics of the 1970s these groups would have been termed 'liberal' and distinguished from 'radical' and 'Marxist' feminists. Relationships between these different forms of feminism were often, across the Global North, antagonistic. The point being made here is not to revive what might be unhappy memories but to suggest how much politics have changed—across the world—since that time and the difference that these changes have made for feminism. The major features of change have been the growing normalisation of neo-liberalism as the dominant form of political reality and the disappearance (or at least the marginalisation) of structural analyses of inequality. What has replaced the kind of connections made by Marxist feminists in the 1970s and 1980s (and Mary McIntosh was a major example here) is the acceptance of the power of discourse and the assumption that changed and changing discourses, for example about sexuality, will bring about structural social change. This note of scepticism about the limitations of the political impact of discourse is perhaps where feminists concerned with interrupting the continued poverty of women might start. However much neo-liberalism tolerates certain forms of personal choice, what it does not tolerate is the idea of genuine human equality, an equality that is formed through equal access to the riches of social production.

**Conclusion**

It is apparent that resistance to the politics of austerity is shared by many people across the Global North. In the UK, alliances that include women’s organisations

3 Judith Butler, 'If hope is an impossible demand, then we demand the impossible', speech delivered on 23 October 2011 at Washington Square Park, New York City, video available at www.salon.com/2011/10/24/judith_butler_at_occupy_wall_street, last accessed 2 April 2014.

4 Among the most important campaigning organisations in the UK are The Women’s Budget Group (www.wbg.org.uk), Women Against the Cuts (which has a group on Facebook) and the Fawcett Society (www.fawcettsociety.org.uk).
and the hierarchy of both the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church have spoken against government policies that have produced a deepening of poverty, as well as the woeful and almost surreal mismanagement of austerity policies by private companies such as G4S.5 But for feminists it is worth considering a response that, in order to improve the situation of women, does not focus on women in particular. For example, the assertion of the needs of all of us, at some stage in our lives, to be cared for would perhaps be more powerful if not immediately linked to women, where the discussion often becomes mired in questions about childcare, women’s aspirations and many other diversionary debates. It is apparent that neoliberalism has a considerable implicit investment in two aspects of the feminine: the assumption that women will continue to ‘care’ and that all women will be in paid work. Yet the presentation of the policies of the Coalition Government in terms of ‘hard-working families’ sets in stone ideals of social and sexual relationships through what Hall and O’Shea (2013: 9) have described as the ‘common-sense of neo-liberalism’, a consistently powerful ideology that pays little attention to the deeply gendered fissures in individual lives. In the conclusion to his account of the genesis of neo-liberalism Stedman Jones (2012: 329) uses the term ‘faith based policy’ to describe the nature of neo-liberalism. An aspect of that substitution of belief over fact is the confident assumption that women will continue to accept what is becoming a ‘third shift’, that we will perform paid work and care work and remain active consumers. What is established here is a triadic relationship with the world, and like many other triadic relationships of human history it is deeply fragile.

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References


5 At the time of writing (March 2014) G4S was being asked to return about £20 million to the UK government for the mismanagement of government contracts.


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