

editorial

109 | introduction: feminism and the politics of austerity

Avtar Brah, Ioana Szeman and Irene Gedalof

In the call for papers for this issue on the 'Politics of Austerity', we invited contributions that would draw on feminist analyses to interrogate the origins, modalities and differential effects of the economic crisis to which austerity has been a political response, as well as the political economy, material effects and discursive legitimations of 'austerity' itself. We were interested in exploring the ways in which the global ascendance of neo-liberal policies and discourses is enmeshed with the crisis in global capitalism, and how divides of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability are being exacerbated at local, regional and global levels in the neo-liberal response to the crisis. We asked what a feminist response to the crisis and its purported solutions might look like, and what feminist alternatives to the austere, neo-liberal state and economic policy are emerging in contemporary scholarship and activism. We were interested as well in feminist interrogations of the language and discourse of austerity and crisis, and in work that would unpick the normative assumptions that underpin the framing of the present moment as one of extraordinary crisis and of austerity as a measured, necessary response to this extraordinary moment. In this normative account of austerity, 'we' are all equally called upon to tighten our belts, to be prudent with 'our' limited resources, to be careful and 'austere' in the sense of being self-disciplined, or of forgoing unnecessary luxuries. Austerity in the language of neo-liberalism covers over its other associations with harshness and severity, associations that feminist scholarship and activism are playing a central role in bringing to light. As such, we hoped this issue would offer a range of feminist challenges to the consolidating commonplaces of austerity now circulating in political culture.

The call for papers generated a great number of responses, confirming our sense that this is an issue that preoccupies feminists across geographical areas, disciplinary spaces and theoretical approaches. Our contributors have addressed the complex problems of austerity in three main ways: first, by challenging the economic and political orthodoxies about the nature of the crisis and the political responses to it for their gendered underpinnings; second, by revealing the gendered, racialised and sexualised exclusions and violence—both material and discursive—that neo-liberal policies of austerity

have produced and enabled, and the limits and possibilities of resistance that have resulted; and third, by tracking the gendered impacts of specific austerity policies and the emerging forms of resistance to them.

economic/political orthodoxies and feminism

In our opening article, Ruth Pearson and Diane Elson provide an exhaustive summary of the cumulative impact of austerity policies under the current UK government, before moving on to an incisive analysis of how the economy is intrinsically gendered across the three spheres of finance, production and reproduction. They draw attention to the ways in which the sphere of reproduction is often left out in discussions of the impact of austerity. They provide an alternative framework (Plan F) for developing an economic strategy that prioritises reproductive and care work. Gender equality is assigned an equal and emphatic importance with finance and production. The problem, they argue, is not only that women, and particular categories of women such as minority ethnic women, are disproportionately affected by the cuts in public expenditure, but rather that the economy is a 'gendered structure'. They challenge the view that the cuts are inevitable, and can be solely blamed on the supposed reckless spending by previous government without paying due attention to the reckless behaviour of the big banks and other financial businesses. Plan F, a feminist alternative to current policy, highlights the need to persuade governments of the importance of not only investing in the physical infrastructure, but crucially also in the social infrastructure. Investment in social infrastructure encompasses areas such as health, education, childcare, social housing and lifelong care, which benefits, as they say, all and not just the few. Whenever such alternatives are offered, it is often asked how they would be financed. Pearson and Elson suggest three ways it could be undertaken: raise the level of income tax payable by higher earners; introduce a financial transactions tax; and, put forth a 'care and equality' tax that would safeguard the sphere of reproduction from cuts. Plan F, they argue, makes both social and economic sense, delivering benefits to the people as much as to the economy.

While Pearson and Elson argue for an alternative approach to the distribution of social resources, Lisa Adkins in her article 'What can money do?' calls on feminists to think carefully about the changing capacities of resources in our analyses of crisis, recession and austerity. Inviting us to be wary of too-simple 'narratives of return' (Hemmings, 2011) to a politics of redistribution that does not take these changes into account, Adkins focuses on the financialisation of the economy and the growing importance of financial markets as both source of crisis but also as defining and constraining key aspects of women's lives. Contemporary transformations to resources, and in particular the role of money as commodity, mean that we

might need to question what we think we know about how economic inequality works. Austerity, for Adkins, must be understood as a political strategy through which the economy of debt and the operation of money as a commodity is being actively extended, an extension that exposes women in particular to the operations of that commodity. Feminism, therefore, might need to focus its concerns less on the redistribution of income—reversing cuts in jobs and public services, for example—and more on what is still an unfamiliar territory of the dynamics of securitised debt, the inequitable distribution of financial risks, and the workings of finance more generally. These dynamics of financialisation, central to a contemporary neo-liberal accumulation strategy based on debt, produce new objects in urgent need of feminist political attention and action. Neo-liberal reform of the state through a politics of austerity is, for Adkins, part of this same strategy, and both must be attended to in rethinking a feminist politics of redistribution.

Penny Griffin's article challenges another set of emerging orthodoxies in these austere times, turning her attention to the language of crisis itself and to the governance strategies neo-liberal economics is promoting. Griffin argues that the language of crisis is repeatedly mobilised to turn attention away from the endemic and everyday inequities of capitalism. Critical feminist accounts of the crisis that might challenge such a narrative or propose radical alternatives are dismissed, while at the same time an essentialising account of gender is mobilised to mitigate the effects of neo-liberal governance solutions to that crisis. Revealing how crisis has become a technique of everyday governance in neo-liberal capitalism, Griffin points to the persistent structures of discrimination and privilege of global finance, while the focus on human flaws and institutional weaknesses further entrenches gender and racial stereotypes of crisis-governance discourse. Feminist alternatives must resist this framing of both crisis and solution, Griffin argues, and must remain committed to fighting the injustices that crisis-governance feminism overlooks, by bringing attention to the social costs of austerity policies, in their gendered and racialised aspects.

Mary Evans' Open Space piece 'Feminism and the implications of austerity' is also concerned with what the language of crisis leaves out in relation to a long history of gendered inequalities. Echoing concerns explored by Pearson and Elson and Griffin, she examines the neo-liberal co-opting of both the feminine and a language of feminism to its own purposes, and neo-liberalism's refusal to account for its gendered exclusions, including its fundamental inability to reconcile care and paid labour in equitable ways.

Sydney Calkin's Open Space piece on 'Impacts and alternatives' shows that young feminist scholars are also taking up issues surrounding the exclusion of care and the reproductive in neo-liberal austerity policies, and intervening in debates on redistribution. These scholars equally explore the difficult road between engagement and co-optation that NGOs must negotiate in their relationship with

the state, and the role of gender policy in national and regional governance institutions.

neo-liberal politics, violence and resistance

A second group of contributions turn to the divisive politics of austerity and the modes of resistance engendered by the material, affective and discursive crises that austerity produces.

What is the interrelationship between xenophobic discourses on migration and the crisis caused by the politics of austerity? This is the question addressed by Anna Carastathis in her article on Greece. There is a focus on the ways in which racialised gendered violence marks the discourses and practices of 'belonging'. Migration, she suggests, is managed through violent means by the state and the para-state. At the same time, a rise in racism and the growing importance of the fascist movement on the political terrain is justified as an understandable reaction to a scarcity of domestic resources seen to be created in part by the demands of austerity and migration. She explores the modalities through which racialised gendered violence secures the politics of austerity through a focus on three eruptions of violence against migrants in Greece. Drawing on Ahmed's (2004) concept of 'the affective economy' she coins the term 'affective economy of hostility' that operates in and through racialised and gendered modes of belonging and estrangement. Carastathis thinks through how and why some bodies are rendered vulnerable and precarious and draws attention to the social scapegoats as consisting of Roma, Muslims and Jewish minorities; Asian, African and Eastern European migrants; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; and leftists who oppose austerity policies. These are the bodies onto which economic and political fears and anxieties are projected. Austerity is socially constructed as a rational response to economic 'crisis', which conceals the discursive and material violence it spawns. It is argued that hate is not something that is confined to the 'extremists' but is part of the 'production of the ordinary'. Resonating with the critiques of the language of extraordinary crisis developed by Griffin and Evans, Carastathis argues that these violent eruptions are not sudden but have been developing over decades when racism became naturalised. Tracing the effects of this hostility in the response to the killings of migrants in Greece and in relation to larger EU measures to stop immigration, Carastathis shows how racialised, gendered and homophobic violence is only apparently caused by austerity and is a continuation of existing nationalistic and divisive politics.

In her article on the 2013 Gezi Riots in Turkey, Öykü Potuoğlu-Cook is also concerned with historicising a presentist focus on post-2008 crisis and austerity. Her article traces Turkey's austerity measures undertaken by the AKP government

back to 2002, and situates the AKP's human security state (Amar, 2013) and its gendered and sexuality-driven moral politics in the larger context of neo-liberal projects in the Global South. Potuoğlu-Cook argues that the AKP's family values-intensive mission co-exists with the masculinised high-security hand of the state in securing both economic growth and conservative morality. She highlights the radical potential and the fault lines of the Gezi protests against the gentrification and 'cleaning up' of this public space of undesirable bodies marked by gender, class, ethnicity and religion. Using a performance paradigm, the article points to the emancipatory and limited potential of embodied strategies in and beyond Gezi and among the diverse participants, including heterogeneous groups of feminists, queer activists, factory workers and leftists, observant Muslims, middle-class secularists and underserved ethnic and religious minorities, from the Kurds and Roma to Alevis and non-Muslims. Questioning both a celebratory identity politics reading of the protests and the drive to establish a hierarchy of suffering among participants, Potuoğlu-Cook urges us to pay attention to both euphoric solidarity and enduring resentment at these sites of resistance.

The Gezi protests are both different from and part of the global protest movement against austerity, in which we can include the two-day occupation of The Women's Library in Whitechapel, London, discussed in the collectively written piece 'Voices of the Occupation'. The authors document the occupation as a response not only to the library closure, but equally to the austerity regime in the UK, and its deepening of existing inequalities. Led by local community and women's organisations, united in an anonymous coalition, the occupation, not unlike the Gezi Park Forums across Turkey, experimented with alternative community organising and resisted the divide-and-rule effects of neo-liberal competition for ever-scarcer resources. These new and sometimes temporary alliances discussed by the collective authors and Potuoğlu-Cook, as well as some of the activists mentioned in Carastathis' article on Greece, illustrate the productive possibilities that the dispossession of the sovereign self in the age of austerity may engender, as argued in Butler and Athanasiou's (2013) book, reviewed in this issue by Emily Jones.¹ Butler and Athanasiou point to the double-sided effects of dispossession, including the opportunity to create new social bonds and forms of collective struggle against the suffering, immiseration and violence of austerity politics.

1 All book reviews associated with this issue are published online at www.feminist-review.com.

austerity policies and their impacts

The final set of papers in the issue looks more closely at the impacts of specific austerity policies on particular groups of women in the UK. Here, Pearson and Elson's overarching account of the cumulative gendered effects of austerity is complemented by a more detailed focus on the lived experiences of groups of women.

In 'Migrant women and social reproduction under austerity', Gwyneth Lonergan discusses the effects on migrant women of the austerity regime in Britain, including both immigration policy and welfare state retrenchment. She shows how cuts to public funding represent self-defeating policies that prevent migrant women from becoming the type of neo-liberal citizens the government claims to encourage them to become. Cuts to English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) classes, for example, challenge migrant women's social reproduction activities, and their attempts to find paid work. Returning to a theme developed by Pearson and Elson, Evans, and Calkin, Lonergan argues that because women's unpaid work does not count as a productive economic activity, many migrant women find themselves unable to demonstrate that they are 'worthy' of becoming citizens.

In their piece entitled 'Layers of inequality' Kalwinder Sandhu and Mary-Ann Stephenson draw attention to the specificity of minority ethnic women's experience in relation to the austerity cuts in spending. From the time that the coalition government announced public spending cuts in 2010, their predicted severe impact on women was a source of significant social and political comment. However, there was little discussion of the likely effects of the cuts on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women. This research is one of the first that foregrounds the ways in which BAME women have fared under the weight of policies of austerity. Sandhu and Stephenson undertook an Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment (EHRIA) of spending cuts on BAME women living in the city of Coventry. They note that Impact Assessment methodologies have been used in various parts of the world, and in the UK they have often been used by public authorities to meet their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty contained in the 2010 Equality Act. But, overall, there has been, they claim, a 'widespread failure by public authorities to properly consider the impact of cuts on BAME women'. One of the key features of the women's experience is that they often face several cuts all at once, and the effects are made worse by the simultaneous operations of the social divisions of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability and so on. For, instance, BAME women are more likely to be living in poverty, working in the public sector, and to receive a higher proportion of their income from working age benefits or tax credits, and they are more likely to confront racialised forms of discrimination and disadvantage in the labour market. The research found that cuts are already and will continue to disproportionately affect BAME women. It is the combination of cuts that is particularly damaging.

Similar findings emerge from Elena Vacchelli, Preeti Kathrecha and Natalie Gyte's Open Space piece on the effects of the cuts on the capacity of the women's voluntary and community sector in London to provide services. Here, the drastic cuts to local government funding combined with the current UK government's localism agenda have meant a serious retrenchment in funding sources. In addition, the growing ascendancy of neo-liberal managerialism and its market logic places women's organisations in a difficult position of competing with each

other for scarce resources. The authors explore both the difficulties and possibilities of resistance to this changing funding and policy-making landscape.

As this issue goes to press, while some claim the 'recovery' has started, new warnings of yet another global economic crisis on the horizon are being reported. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, whether in recovery or crisis, neo-liberal economics and politics have proved deeply destructive to most women, and have exacerbated the intersecting divides of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class. The material and discursive inroads made by austerity policies and politics are unlikely to be clawed back without innovative and persistent critique and resistance to their underlying logics and rationales. We hope that this issue contributes some of the necessary resources for such critique and practice, and invite our readers to 'write back' in order to continue this crucial debate.

references

Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, New York: Routledge.

Amar, P. (2013) *The Security Archipelago: Human Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Butler, J. and Athanasiou, A. (2013) *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hemmings, C. (2011) *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

doi:10.1057/fr.2014.59

Copyright of Feminist Review is the property of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.