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Pulling Together in a Crisis? Anarchism, Feminism and the Limits of Left-wing Convergence in Austerity Britain

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Abstract:

Since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis, left-wing politics in Britain, despite some initial optimism, has struggled to contest neoliberal ideology and the government's pursuit of an austerity agenda. As part of this struggle, however, a number of significant new voices have emerged which, taken together, could be seen as a partial reorientation of the discourses, objectives and forms of organisation shaping the trajectory of British left politics. In this article, we examine, from a feminist perspective, three key, recently emergent, sites of anti-austerity activism – namely, Left Unity, the People's Assembly and Occupy – in order to explore to what extent and in what ways the traditional British left is in the process of transforming itself. More specifically, we seek to discover whether, as some have claimed, the traditional left is exhibiting a new found amenability to anarchism. In the article, we argue that although we find a number of fruitful points of contact between anarchists and the traditional left – including attempts in some socialist spaces to cultivate more democratic and participatory modes of activism – the ideological and organisational gulf between anarchism and the traditional left remains significant, at least in a British context. We go on to suggest that if we are seeing a mutation of the left at present it concerns a noticeable (if partial and contested) 'feminist turn' in terms of the composition, ideas and practices of Left Unity, the People's Assembly and Occupy LSX. In so doing, we highlight the importance of feminism (both as a strand of activism and analytical framework) for making sense of contemporary left politics.

Key words: left politics, feminism, anarchism, Left Unity, People's Assembly, Occupy LSX

Introduction

Since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis, left-wing politics in Britain, despite some initial optimism, has struggled to contest dominant discourses and policy formations, which

remain rooted in neoliberal ideology and the pursuit of an austerity agenda (Worth, 2013; Cooper and Hardy, 2013; Seymour, 2014; Gill, 2008). As part of this battle, however, a number of significant new voices have emerged which, taken together, could be seen as a partial reorientation of the discourses, objectives and forms of organisation shaping the trajectory of British left politics. In this article, we examine three key, recently emergent, sites of anti-austerity activism – namely, Left Unity, the People’s Assembly and Occupy – in order to explore to what extent and in what ways the traditional British left is in the process of transforming itself.

More specifically, we seek to discover whether, as some have claimed, the ‘traditional left’ is exhibiting a new found amenability to anarchism (Critchley, 2013; Day, 2005, Graeber, 2012, Newman, 2010). We argue here that while we find a number of fruitful points of contact between anarchists and the traditional left – including attempts in some socialist spaces to cultivate more democratic and participatory modes of activism – the ideological and organisational gulf between these two movements remain significant.

Indeed, if we are seeing a mutation of the left at present – and it is not yet clear that we are seeing a permanent one – it concerns a noticeable ‘feminist turn’ in terms of the composition, ideas and practices of Left Unity, the People’s Assembly and Occupy LSX. In contrast to the Special Issue’s characterisation of the left, we suggest that the main challenge to traditional left politics in Britain today has come from feminism, rather than anarchism. This is by no means to say that anarchism is absent in these three left spaces, but that its significance needs to be understood in relation to feminism. This line of argument, in turn, complicates a number of assumptions shaping the recent literature on feminism and the left. Authors such as Nancy Fraser (2009), Angela McRobbie (2009), Nina Power (2009) and Hester Eisenstein (2009) have all, in different ways, offered accounts of what they consider to be the disarticulation of socialism and feminism. For them, the dominant modalities of feminism in contemporary political discourse are individualised, ‘soft’ liberal or even neoliberal variants of feminism (Rottenburg, 2014), in which the more systemic critiques of patriarchal capitalism that characterised earlier generations of socialist feminism have been cast to the margins. Now, while we do not dispute the existence of significant obstacles to the strengthening of feminist socialism, we do think that the palpable impact of feminism across a variety of strands of contemporary left activism should make us sceptical of claims that socialism and feminism have parted company. What follows then is an effort to map the multiple and precarious

‘points of contact’ between feminism, anarchism and the traditional left in Britain today and to offer some reflections on the strengths and limits of these burgeoning alliances.

Section One: Mapping the field of study

In this article, we undertake a feminist reading of our three exemplars of contemporary left wing politics and, in so doing, commit to a number of methodological imperatives. The first concerns the need to be attentive to the role that gender, as a power relation, plays in shaping the discourses and practices of all social activism including the left. While tracing the operations of gender, feminists remind us that sexism is not always the result of intentional action and that it is important to explore how oppression can be produced unwittingly and even unwillingly. Thus, recent allegations of sexual violence involving high profile left individuals and organisations (such as Julian Assange, and within the British Socialist Workers’ Party and the Socialist Party), although important and depressing, do not tell the full story of gender discrimination within the left. Equally crucial are the various ways in which gendered assumptions and hierarchies are subtly reproduced through individual and collective behavior within ostensibly progressive activist communities (Kuumba, 2001; Coleman and Bassi, 2011).

If the first methodological imperative is to trace the operations of gender in all aspects of our political activism, the second is to undertake this task by foregrounding the experiences and self-understandings of women and self-identified feminists working within this context (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2010). To this end, we need to be attentive to where they are positioned within the movement, to what they are saying and doing and to who is listening. Given that feminism has taken on renewed vitality and visibility in Britain in recent years both as a social movement and as an object of discussion in mainstream media (Cochrane, 2013; Dean, 2012; Redfern and Aune, 2013), any reflections on the future of the left without giving the efforts of feminists to transform it due attention would be to miss an important aspect of the story.

The third methodological imperative that must be heeded concerns the importance of understanding social movements not as unified static entities, but rather as context specific, fluid sites of contestation with porous boundaries (Eschle, 2005). Such an approach cautions against generalising about the left across different locations without first exploring the role of

concrete, contingent factors as well as locally defined and individually experienced structural forces in shaping this movement's trajectories. Thus, the tentative arguments put forward in this article about the relationship between feminists, anarchists and the 'traditional left' are specific to our three case studies and cannot be generalised across other left sites of politics in Britain or abroad. Only careful empirical, comparative work can tell us if the patterns noted here are being repeated elsewhere.

Having outlined our feminist approach, we now turn to the protagonists of our story and offer some working definitions. Starting with the 'traditional left', we refer to a range of individuals, groups and organisations who consider themselves to be a) to the left of the Labour Party (adapted from the definition of 'radical left' in March, 2011, p. 1) and b) who self-identify as either socialist, Marxist or communist. All three sites explored in this article – Left Unity, People's Assembly and Occupy LSX – provide a home to 'traditional left' activists so defined.

By feminism we are referring to a movement that embodies a 'shared principled commitment to challenging gender hierarchies' (Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001, p. 1158). In our view this involves, an acknowledgment and analysis of injustice, a vision of an alternative, even if inchoate, and a range of collective and individual actions to resist this injustice that include, but cannot be reduced to, public expressions of protest. While feminism has been primarily associated with the liberation of women, its conception of social justice often also speaks to class and racial inequalities as well as to gender stereotypes that constrain men. In this sense then feminism can be understood as an emancipatory project 'for everyone' (hooks, 2000; Eschle and Maiguashca, 2010, p. 122).

Last, but not least, for the purposes of this article, anarchism is understood as a movement that wages war against all forms of domination including but not limited to 'patriarchy, racism and fundamentalism of all creeds' (PGA – Hallmarks, 2015). Like feminists and Marxists, they strive for a world that is marked by freedom, self-determination, egalitarianism and diversity (Sitrin 2012). Contrary to their Marxist and many of their feminist colleagues, however, most anarchists refuse to grant the state any role in bringing about revolutionary change (Day 2005; also see Choat in this issue), a point of difference that, as we shall see, is crucial in limiting their role within both Left Unity and the People's Assembly. Moreover, committed to the idea that 'any sort of revolution against political power must be libertarian in form' (Newman 2009, p. 228), anarchists insist on the importance of organising themselves in accordance with the principles of prefiguration (for

detailed discussions of this concept see Teivainen and Wigger in this issue), participatory democracy, and open dialogue. In particular, they refuse the hierarchical and representative modes of deliberation characteristic of some socialist and feminist groups (Maiguashca 2014). In this broad context, anarchism has been understood as taking three forms (Clough and Blumberg 2012, p. 340): as a historically and theoretically coherent movement around class oppression (van der Walt and Schmidt 2009); as a methodology (Graeber 2009); and as a political culture (Gordon 2007). As shall be discussed, we found the latter two conceptions of anarchism, which both seek to capture the open-ended, non-hierarchical, prefigurative orientation of anarchist modes of being and acting, to be more helpful when looking for points of overlap between anarchism, feminism and traditional left politics in the British context.

Taken together, feminism, anarchism and socialism/Marxism all form part of what we mean by ‘the left’ to the extent that they are all fighting against what they perceive to be socially constructed, and, therefore, unjust hierarchies (whether they be around gender, race or class) and for a more equal, redistributive society. In this way, we seek to redefine the left as a project based on a shared moral objection to ‘unjustifiable but remedial inequalities of status, rights, powers and condition’ and a commitment to ‘rectify’ them through political action (Lukes 2003, p. 612). Understood in this way, the left can comprise manifold strands of activism that includes, but goes beyond socialism/Marxism (Eschle and Maiguashca 2014). From this perspective, feminism and anarchism, alongside socialism, must be included as key protagonists of left politics.

Having characterised feminism and anarchism as discrete movements, albeit both located squarely on the left, it is important to remember that the boundaries of these three movements are porous and that the identities of activists may be multiple (e.g., socialist feminist or anarcho feminist) and shift in light of concrete circumstances. This mutual interpolation is made even more likely by the fact that, in addition to their shared egalitarian vision, they both enact their politics according to an ‘ethos’ (or ‘political culture’, to use Gordon’s term) that foregrounds self-determination, diversity, and de-centralisation (Maiguashca 2014, p. 87). Indeed, feminist experiments with participatory democracy and prefiguration are now a well-documented feature of their activism (Poletta 2002; Eschle and Maiguashca 2010). To this extent, neither camp buys into the insurrectionary model of social change, preferring instead to invest in a range of incremental processes that aim to empower

individuals as well as collectives; to confront and disrupt oppressive power relations in all its forms; and to reconstitute everyday life through strategies that engage with both the private and the public sphere. As Kornegger puts it, ‘feminists have been unconscious anarchists in both theory and practice for many years’ (quoted in The AK Press Collective 2012, p. 10), a point also noted by Teivainen in this issue. In sum, any effort to map ‘left wing convergence’ today must take into account the already well established points of overlap between these different strands of activism (whether it be in terms of vision or their mode of doing politics).

We shall end this section with a short examination of each of our three cases and a justification for choosing to explore them together. We begin with Left Unity, which was founded in 2013, following a call by Ken Loach, a film director, for the creation of a new left-wing political party (Loach, Hudson and Achcar, 2013), and formally came into existence in London in November 2013. LU presents itself as a broad left party and has been described by others (including by several of our interviewees) as trying to replicate the example set by several European parties such as the electorally successful Syriza in Greece, and the growing political movements of Podemos in Spain and Red-Green Alliance in Denmark (see Hudson 2012; March 2011). Since its founding conference, Left Unity has gone through a process of formalisation, and has received some media attention (including coverage in *The Guardian* and an appearance on the BBC’s *Daily Politics*). It has garnered a membership of around 2000, a respectable showing for a young radical left organisation.

The People’s Assemblies Against Austerity formed after a group of politicians and activists, several of whom had been prominent in the Stop the War campaigns, wrote an open letter to the *Guardian* on 5 February 2013 calling for a broad movement to resist austerity. These figures included members of Counterfire, the Communist Party of Britain, the left-wing of the Labour Party, Greens and trade unionists from the Trade Union Congress, the Unite, Public and Commercial Services Union, the National Union of Teachers, and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers.¹ Over the last year, around 80 active local People’s Assemblies have formed, of varying sizes, but most are between 5-30 activists working in a wide range of local campaigns. The founders of the People’s Assembly sought to make a broad movement in which groups would agree to leave their ideological differences behind with the aim of forging common campaigns against austerity.

Our third case is Occupy London Stock Exchange (LSX). Inspired by struggles in North Africa, the Middle East and the USA in the form of Occupy Wall Street and drawing sustenance from earlier forms of activism around the anti-globalisation movement, Occupy LSX settled down in front of St Paul's Cathedral on October 15th 2011 with a proliferation of other Occupy protest camps bubbling up across the country in the subsequent months. Occupy presented itself as a challenge to the austerity measures imposed by the Coalition government following the financial crisis of 2008. It generated widespread attention for its efforts to instantiate a participatory, non-hierarchical model of political organising within the camps. Occupy LSX was dismantled by bailiffs on February 28th 2012, a little over four months after it was erected, and the camp at Finsbury Park was 'closed' by the summer, making them two of the longest standing Occupy camps worldwide (Halvorsen 2014, p. 2). While the camps themselves are no longer operative, there remains a core of activists who continue to bring the ethos and practices of Occupy to other spheres of left activism whether that be at the People's Assembly or Left Unity.

These three sites arguably represent the most significant spaces of resistance to austerity in contemporary Britain, and have hitherto not been subject to sustained academic scrutiny (see, for example, Bailey, 2014; Worth, 2013; Cooper and Hardy, 2013). In some respects, the three cases are very different: Left Unity is a fairly traditional political party with electoral ambitions; the People's Assembly is a coalition of different sections of the 'traditional' left including parties, organisations and trade unions; whilst Occupy is a diverse movement sceptical of rigid organisational structures. Having said this, there are a number of striking similarities across the three sites. All are committed to building an inclusive and unified left movement, which is free of the fragmentation and sectarianism that has blighted it thus far. Moreover, all three identify and seek to respond to a similar series of problems with the traditional left in Britain, including a lack of democracy and accountability, organisational weakness, and a tendency to isolation. Finally, all three sites exhibit a degree of commitment to feminism (although this varies across and within the three sites) and to horizontal, participatory forms of organisation (particularly in Occupy and Left Unity). Thus, despite their different character, aims and political inheritances, all three are striving to revitalise the left by opening it up and making it more pluralistic.

Section Two: Left Unity

Our research into Left Unity (hereafter LU) involved interviews with a broad cross section of active LU members from around Britain, including national council members and principal speakers.² We also engaged in participant observation at several LU meetings and events (e.g., the founding conference in London in November 2013, its national conference in March 2014, and a number of branch meetings in Leeds) and conducted interviews with 21 party activists including several on the executive committee. Of these, the majority self-identified as socialist, Marxist and/or feminist. We also undertook extensive study of online comment pieces, LU facebook group discussions, policy documents, flyers and promotional material. In what follows we discuss LU's relationship with feminism and anarchism in terms of three general benchmarks: a) the 'politics of presence' in terms of who is present, visible and active within the organisation (e.g., are self-identified feminists or anarchists in attendance?); b) ideology in terms of the discourses and ideas acknowledged and incorporated into their analyses (e.g., is gender articulated as a form of power?); and c) political practices in terms of the extent to which they seek to enact their commitment to either feminist or anarchist principles.

Left Unity and Feminism

As indicated, LU's primary rationale has been to establish a 'broad' left-of-Labour presence in British politics, occupying a space between Labour and the various – generally small – far left groups (interviews with LU activists, 15/08/14; 3/7/14; Murray, 2013). In so doing, it has sought to attract support by presenting itself as a break from the habits, attitudes and organisational forms of the traditional institutional left. Central to this process of differentiation has been an attempt to cast itself as unapologetically feminist. Indeed, several interviewees framed feminism as central to the wider LU project (interviews with LU activist, 15/07/14, 28/03/14, 28/03/14). This is reflected in the highly 'feminised' character of the party (at least in comparison to other left groups). We found a high incidence of self-identified feminists amongst women and men in LU, and we found a roughly 70/30 gender split at the national conferences (far from equal, but better than many sections of the British left). The adoption of a 50/50 gender quota means women are equally represented on the national council and all representative committees.

In terms of ideology, LU's founding statement describes the party as 'socialist, feminist and environmentalist' (Left Unity, 2013). This came about as a result of the victory

of the (pluralistic and pro-feminist) Left Party platform over the Socialist and Communist Platform (neither of which mentioned feminism) in the debate about the content of the party's official founding statement. Its feminism is justified on the grounds that 'historical experience shows that the full liberation of women does not automatically follow the nationalization of productive forces or the reordering of the economy' (Left Unity, 2013). Despite this explicit feminist identification, it is interesting to find that there is no recognition of either patriarchy or sexism as a separate form of oppression with the founding statement claiming that LU stands against 'capitalism, imperialism, war, racism, Islamophobia and fascism' (Left Unity, 2013). Moreover, most interviewees held commitments to challenging capitalism and oppression of women, but without explicit attempts to theorise the relationship between capitalism and sexism/women's oppression. This reflects LU's wider eschewal of clear cut theoretical 'positions'.

Turning to LU's practices and campaigns, in terms of organisational structure, it has made significant efforts to ensure a modicum of gender parity with regards to political representation. All main LU meetings and conferences have been co-chaired by a man and a woman and chairs intervene and select speakers that are women and from minority backgrounds if white men are seen to dominate discussion. LU also ran quotas for its leadership to ensure women were represented by adopting a rule that 50 per cent of the party leadership would be women at the founding conference in November 2013. Furthermore, it was decided that two of the party's four principal spokespeople would be women. Perhaps, even more importantly, seeking to break from what one of the constitution's architects (a libertarian Marxist) has called the 'pointy fingers and raised voices' (interview with LU activist, 17/06/14) that have been commonplace in left parties, LU has established a Women's Caucus (as well as caucuses for LGBTQ and disabled activists) which provides a women only space in which to discuss issues of concern and to provide a vehicle for women's campaigning within the party structures. The women's caucus has been instrumental in designing LU's safer spaces policy which was recently debated at the November 2014 conference. To the disappointment of self-identified feminists, however, the motion was defeated in its current form and, as we write, the policy is being revised in the hopes that it will be approved in the near future.

This challenge to the effort to embed gender parity in LU's representative bodies has primarily come from members of the Communist Platform who have been consistently

critical of the use of gender quotas and the safe spaces policy (McNair, 2014, p. 7). In addition, the gender parity in elected positions has not, at present, translated into gender parity within the wider membership: several interviewees acknowledged that LU remains disproportionately white and male, which chimes with our observations at LU events.³

In terms of its outreach practices, while LU has co-operated with feminists in campaigns around the rights of women workers in India and abortion rights in Ireland and Spain, the bulk of LU's activism and press releases remains focussed on austerity and issues such as the NHS, anti-bedroom tax campaigns, and so on. Support for, and participation in, specifically feminist campaigns have been less prominent thus far. Moreover, some feminists in Left Unity took issue with the electoral coalition with TUSC (the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition) at the 2015 general election because of allegations that it has endorsed candidates accused of abuse towards women.

Overall, there is no doubt that feminism features prominently at the level of ideas and official discourse in LU, and there have been a range of genuine attempts to integrate feminism more fully into LU's wider socialist politics. This, in our view, constitutes a significant and historically unusual overlap – if not ‘convergence’ – of feminism and socialism. That said, the points of contact between feminism and LU remain partial and incomplete: whilst feminist-informed defences of gender parity in the institutional set-up of LU have been relatively successful, this has not yet translated into a full integration of feminism into the practices and ideologies of LU. The bulk of LU meetings and events remain numerically dominated by (white) men, and gender and feminism have not, as yet, featured prominently in LU's press releases and political interventions. So whilst LU is certainly symptomatic of a shift towards a more rigorous embrace of feminism by the socialist left in Britain, this ‘embrace’ is delimited by various forms of ambiguity, unease and resistance.

Left Unity and Anarchism

Whilst LU has made significant attempts at explicitly affirming feminism, anarchism assumes a much more low-key presence. Reticence towards formalising any kind of alliance between LU and anarchists has come from both sides. Unsurprisingly, some anarchists have explicitly

rejected the idea of engaging with a political party and electoral politics, refusing to work with the state and fearing that if they did so, direct action would end up taking a back seat to party survival and maintaining good relations with trade unions. Moreover, some have criticised LU's attempts to appeal to left-wing Social Democrats by positing itself as a left alternative to the Labour Party (see Cox 2013; interview with anarchist activist, 26/06/14). Ian Bone of the organisation Class War, for example, has stridently condemned the Oxbridge backgrounds of leading figures in LU, although he has equally praised the less hierarchical nature of LU in comparison with other British left parties and contrasted it with the SWP (Bone 2013). Anarchists are not alone in feeling doubtful about the benefits of collaboration. One self-identified Marxist in LU admitted to us, 'I don't think it is important for anarchists and socialists to be in the same organisation' (LU activist, 11/06/14) and a high profile LU member concurred: 'we are a party with a structure, with rules and regulations but if people share our aims, even if they call themselves anarchist that is fine by me, but they can't come in and use it as a vehicle for something else' (LU activist, 14/07/14).

Having acknowledged the sceptics, it was refreshing to find that a number in LU expressed an interest in working with anarchists. One high profile LU member argued that 'if you are going to build a broad church left wing party then that absolutely should include anarchists' (LU activist, 15/07/14) and LU's website has run articles that have called for anarchists to join their ranks. In a similar vein, we witnessed public appeals at LU's founding conference to include anarchists as fellow travellers. We also find that LU has made several efforts to reach out to anarchists, for instance by running a stall at the anarchist book fair in Bristol in 2013 and including black in its logo. These gestures of pluralism and inclusivity have not gone unnoticed and we did find some self-identified anarchists working within LU. They include leading national figures such as membership secretary Barbara Segal (an anarcho-syndicalist) and Stephen Miller, charged with coordinating LU's student groups. As Miller puts it, in LU 'I am not being told I have to kneel down and pray to Karl Marx. I can have an opinion' (Miller, 2014). We also found younger activists of an anarchist persuasion working in local LU branches in Exeter and Nottingham.

If anarchists do have a presence, albeit limited, in LU, what are the ideological synergies between anarchism and LU's agenda? Whilst LU's commitment to the state as a potential agent of progressive social change puts it at odds with anarchism, LU's intersectional and pluralistic analysis of power offers a potential point of contact. The

founding LU statement foregrounds a plurality of different power structures and sources of injustice, stating that the party stands against all forms of discrimination whether on the basis of ‘class, gender, race, impairment, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, religion, age or politics’ (Left Unity, 2013). Furthermore, the founding statement argues that LU must resist the ‘bureaucratic centralism, corruption and sexism to be found in many existing political parties’ (Left Unity, 2013). Clearly then, LU’s pluralistic – indeed ‘intersectional’ – understanding of power, coupled with a commitment to a less hierarchical party structure, renders it more ‘anarchist friendly’ than much of the traditional left.

Turning lastly to the political practices and campaigns of LU and the extent to which they attract anarchist participation, we found some evidence of co-operation, especially with the anarcho-syndicalists. In Liverpool, for instance, LU activists work with members of SolFed in organising social centres, events for international women’s day and protests against austerity cuts (interview LU activist, 07/07/14). LU activists also do campaign work alongside anarchists in protests against the EDL. Despite these examples of camaraderie, deep differences in goals and methods of organising remain with organisations such as IWW and AFed steering far away from any and all national political parties, including LU. Moreover, when anarchists from Occupy joined some LU local branches and called for the implementation of consensus decision making, their request was politely rejected by the local LU leadership as being impractical in the context of a political party (LU activist interview, 26/09/14).

To sum up, anarchism conceived either as a movement or as an ideology is not particularly visible in LU. Given the fact that anarchists are generally adverse to state oriented politics and are suspicious of representative, bureaucratic modes of organisation - no matter how democratic they may seem – their absence is not remotely surprising. If one views anarchism as an ethos or political culture, however, then its influence appears more broad-ranging, although more difficult to pin down. Attempting to capture the mind-set of some of their younger colleagues in the party, several veteran LU activists chose to characterise them as occupying a ‘grey area between Marxism and anarchism’ (LU activist interview, 26/09/14) and as upholding a ‘looser sense of movementism’ (LU activist interview 15/08/14). It is our view that this ‘anarchist’ sensibility, noted by LU activists, can be traced to several sources including young activists’ exposure to the 2010-11 student movement (Penny, 2011; Cooper and Hardy, 2013), to the Occupy movement as well as to

recent forms of feminist activism both inside and outside these two mentioned movements (Evans and Chamberlain, 2014; Cochrane, 2013). From this vantage point, ‘anarchism’ as a mode of doing politics is alive and well and is finding advocates in multiple sites of left-wing politics which may or may not attract self-identified anarchist activists.

Section Three: The People’s Assembly

Our research into the People’s Assembly (hereafter PA) was based on participant observation at its four main gatherings: the PA Assembly on Dec 7th 2013 at Goldsmith’s University, London; The Women’s Assembly on Feb 22 2013 at Conway Hall, London; the PA National Assembly on March 15th 2014 in the Emmanuel Centre, London; and the No More Austerity National Demonstration on June 21st 2014 in London. It also draws on over a dozen interviews with key activists and organisers as well as an analysis of the main documents gathered at the events and their written statements to be found online.

People’s Assembly and Feminism

The PA differs from LU in being a slightly looser grassroots coalition, rather than a fully formed political party, and seeks to attract a broad range of anti-austerity organisations including ‘national and local unions, anti-cuts campaigns, and other student, pensioner, unemployed, disabled people’s, women’s, Black people’s, youth and LGBT campaigning organisations’ (People’s Assembly, 2013b). Within this very broad church we found that women and feminists were present, although not as visible or as audible as in LU. Indeed, some feminist activists within it expressed to us their concerns about the male dominance of the big national PA meetings and the under-representation of women in general within the coalition.

In order to address this problem, the PA organised the Women’s Assembly Against Austerity in February 2014. A women’s only space, this event attracted numerous feminists aligned with groups such as the Association of Indian Women, the National Assembly of Women, Abortion Rights, Women Unite, the black student campaign and the CND. One of us who attended the day-long event found it to be a vibrant forum for feminist and women’s activism that offered a stimulating alternative to the more top down speech making culture that marks the national meetings. Although the morning was dedicated to plenary talks, all of

which explored, in some detail, the gendered nature of austerity policies, the afternoon was organised into workshops where the audience was invited to participate and engage each other in dialogue. In this context, stories about the impact of austerity as well as individual and collective efforts to resist it were shared, discussed and affirmed. More participatory and inclusive, the Women's Assembly offered a glimpse of a different mode of organising to that of the more mainstream PA events.

Although undeniably present, at least in the context of the Women's Assembly, feminism and gender, as analytical frameworks, do not feature prominently in the PA's stated ideological vision. So, for instance, the PA's founding statement does not specify patriarchy or sexism as being sources of oppression for women. Moreover, while protecting women from austerity is identified as an aim in the People's Charter of 2014, their experiences of oppression are presented primarily in economic terms:

'Women in particular bear the brunt of austerity, both in work and in managing the fall out of cuts to services in communities. The over-representation of women among both the poor and the lowest paid must be treated as the national emergency it is. Equal pay must be enforced and child-care should be free at the point of need.'
(Peoples' Assembly, 2013a).

Despite its laudable intent, this document needlessly limits 'fairness and justice' for women to equal pay and child care, a policy which is presented as a women's issue rather than as a societal one.

Moving from theory to practice, we found that the biggest obstacle to feminist 'convergence' with the PA arose from the rather traditional – indeed arguably rather 'masculinist' style – of many of the events. Several of our interviewees expressed reservations about the plenary speaker format of most PA meetings, often centred around high profile left wing men such as Owen Jones and Russell Brand. In a similar vein, feminist activists within the PA have criticised national and local meetings for failing to consider gender issues and for focusing solely on economic issues (interview with PA activist, 15/07/14, LU activist 14/07/14).⁴

Overall then, although there are many self-identified feminists operating within the PA, and although many PA activists do recognise the gendered impacts of austerity, PA's

embrace of feminism has been rather less embedded in the structures and discourses of PA than LU's. With the exception of the Women's Assembly Against Austerity, PA has – in order to maintain a broad coalition of support – tended to stick to a rather minimal anti-austerity agenda, and, to some extent, inherits organisational forms and styles of politics from the traditional left (encompassing left trade unions, the Communist Party of Britain, the Labour left, and some individuals from the SWP). Whilst there are undoubtedly 'points of contact' between PA and feminism, we find little evidence of a more thoroughgoing convergence.

The People's Assembly and Anarchism

If feminism has a presence, albeit marginal, within the PA, anarchism and anarchists appear to be even less conspicuous. Indeed, interviews with national organisers and activists from larger PA groups in Manchester, London and Bristol suggest that there have been very few anarchists involved, at least 'officially', in the PAs.⁵ As an activist with an overview of the movement as a whole, put it, 'people I've spoken to who are more anarchist in their thought or people from the Occupy movement... find it to be too restrictive, to be too top down and not participative enough'. She goes on to explain, 'we're not talking about fundamentally changing the system, and I think anarchists would fundamentally disagree with this tactic or strategy' (interview, 17/09/14).

This lack of engagement is confirmed by a number of anarchists whom we found to be highly critical of the PA. There were several reasons put forward for their disinterest. First, the PA is perceived as too self-regarding and insular, involved in promoting the careers of leading figures, and too closely tied to the project of moving the Labour Party to the left (interviews with AFed/IWW activists, 8/7/14; 10/7/14, interview with unaligned anarchist, 12/08/14). Furthermore, the PA is criticised for being essentially a talking shop, rather than a movement or political campaign by groups like AFed who prize 'action not talk' (AFed London 2013). So when SolFed activists participated in early PA meetings in Liverpool, they expressed disappointment with the old fashioned use of speeches (SolFed 2011). Finally, some anarchists think that it is 'full of trots' (interview with anarchist activist, 17/07/14) given that it shares with the 'old left' a top down, bureaucratic mode of organising (interview with unaligned anarchist, 12/08/14) and has a significant presence of current or former SWP

members – particularly those associated with Counterfire, which formed in 2007 after breaking away from the SWP. As one anarchist activist argued ‘The style is also hierarchical with it all decided by the leadership’ (interview with anarchist activist 10/09/14). Thus, to the extent then that anarchists do show up to PA events, it is often to protest against them and to offer an alternative, rather than participate with them. This tactic was in full view at the PA’s National Demonstration on 21 June 2014 in central London when activists from Class War, AFed and IWW, carrying placards and banners, loudly denounced the PA, in general, and Owen Jones, in particular.

The general lack of interest in and support for PA on the part of anarchists may also be due to the rather generic ideological framework guiding PA speeches and actions. Thus, although PA offers a home and even leadership positions to self-identified Marxists,⁶ unlike LU, it does not explicitly self-describe as ‘socialist’. In fact, we find few explicit references to ‘capitalism’, let alone Marxism or socialism, in the aims or statements of the PA which tends to deploy a language of ‘anti-austerity’, ‘cuts’ and ‘fairness’ in an effort not to alienate its politically disparate followers. Indeed, the PA’s call for higher taxes on the rich clearly implies their support for a pro-active, welfarist state, a commitment that anarchists would likely contest.

Given the apparent paucity of anarchists within it and the largely state-centred vision of progressive social change, it is not surprising that we found little evidence of sustained joint campaigns between anarchists and PA. Nonetheless, we did find some PA and Occupy activists engaging in discussions about joint demonstrations (interviews with anarchist activists, 22/08/14, 23/08/14). We also discovered a few examples of groups like SolFed working in joint campaigns with the PA and holding joint workshops on austerity, alongside a range of groups and academics in Brighton (Brighton Peoples’ Asembly, 2014).

In sum, there is no convergence between the politics of the PA and anarchism. Interestingly, reticence to work with what is seen as a traditional left organisation, replete with hierarchical modes of organising, was expressed by anarchists of both a class based (e.g., IWW) and non-affiliated, ‘intersectional’ orientation (e.g., Occupy). Although we want hold back from casting the PA as simply another instance of the hierarchical, bureaucratic structures characteristic of the traditional Trotskyist and social democratic lefts, we accept that its connections to the Labour left, the trade union movement, and sections of the

Trotskyist revolutionary left render the PA an unlikely ally for British anarchists.

Section Four: The Case of Occupy

The findings for this final case study are based on interviews and written documentation. In terms of the former, we interviewed a dozen participants from Occupy London, Edinburgh, Exeter and Manchester of which several were self-identified feminists. In terms of the latter, we relied on academic articles as well as primary online sources, such as the Occupied Times (OT), a free broadsheet which is still being published periodically.

Occupy and Feminism

At first blush, Occupy LSX was a visibly feminised space. Not only did women actively participate in camp life in equal numbers to men (Roth et al, 2014, p. 12) but a commitment to inclusivity when it came to verbal representations at meetings, meant that they were both seen and heard. Moreover, many of these women were already politicised around gender issues having been previously involved in women's organisations and/or demonstrations (Roth et al 2014, p. 15). It is important to note, however, that this was not the case in a number of other Occupy sites in Britain. Describing the camp in Edinburgh, one male interviewee told us that at first it was 'relatively balanced, more so than most things on the left actually', but that 'over time it got pretty male' (interview with Occupy activist, 25/05/14). Similarly, another interviewee, who is also a PA activist, described her experience of Manchester Occupy as relatively male dominated (interview Occupy/PA activist, 15/07/14).

If women were actively engaged in Occupy LSX, to what extent did this movement incorporate gender into their analysis of the current system? Or to put it another way, in what ways, if any, were the ideas/visions of Occupy activists 'feminist friendly'? Judging from its multiple online collective statements, including the 'Initial Statement' of October 17th, gender oppression is not central to either the movement's diagnosis of the problem or its prescription for a better society. Indeed, much of the analysis found in these documents focuses on the injustice of economic inequality and, more specifically, the fact that only a few (1%) gain from the current economic system at the expense of the majority (99%). In order to rectify

this, in its ‘initial statement’, Occupy calls for ‘structural change towards authentic global equality’ and a move towards ‘a sustainable economic system that benefits present and future generations’ (see Dowling et al, 2012, endnote 3). Interestingly, apart from economic injustice, more references are made to ending militarism and environmental degradation, than any other causes, a fact that reflects, at least in part, the relatively high participation of anti-war, trade union and climate change activists in Occupy LSX (Roth et al, 2014, p. 14-16).

If one is looking for explicit recognition of gender oppression, as well as racism, ableism and other forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, language, religious affiliation, one has to examine the ‘Safer Spaces Policy’ (see <http://occupylondon.org.uk/about/statements/safer-space-policy/>). Here we do find reference to ‘sexism’ as well as ‘homophobia’, but these are presented as instances of disrespectful behaviour in the context of collective discussions and guarding against them as a matter of personal responsibility and a sensitive use of language. While the policy is certainly to be applauded, it in no way addresses ‘sexism’ as a structural power relation that operates beyond an individual’s intentional actions.⁷

Moving on to the practices of Occupy LSX, as stated earlier, it is important to remember that, in principle at least, feminists and anarchists share a concern with social reproduction, prefiguration and the transformation of ‘everyday life’. Despite this ideological synergy, however, evidence suggests that the experiences of activists involved in the protest camp were highly gendered. So, for instance, scholars of Occupy point to a division of labour that marked the camps whereby women undertook ‘supportive roles’ e.g. cooking and organising camp life, while men were encouraged to contribute to the intellectual production of the movement in the context, for instance, of producing and writing the OT or maintaining the functioning of the General Assemblies (Roth et al, 2014, p. 22; Halvorsen 2014, p. 15). In other words, women tended to be relegated to the realm of the mundane ‘everyday’ while men dominated the realm of action, i.e. decision-making and the generation of protest actions. Moreover, despite explicit efforts to make the General Assemblies inclusive, complaints did emerge about the gendered nature of these discussions and the way they were run, a point also corroborated by a number of our interviewees with respect to protest camps outside of London (Dowling et al, 2012, p. 613; interview with Occupy activist 15/07/14).

Even more worrying were the charges of overt sexist behaviour in the camps. As one Occupy participant told us, while a number of women and feminists gravitated to Occupy Edinburgh at the start, ‘after the first couple of days no women were staying at night’ in the camp and ‘after a while they gave up in despair’ (interview with Occupy activist, 27/07/14) due to the rude and even aggressive behaviour of some of the men on site (interviews with Occupy participants, 08/07/14, 09/07/14). A similar exodus occurred from the Exeter site (interview with Occupy participant, 10/09/14). In sum, although women did actively participate in Occupy, gender power relations remained a concern: as one article of the OT put it, ‘In the outside, a beast called patriarchy rules the social domain. In our camps the situation is little better’ (Stavri, 2011, p. 61).

Occupy and Anarchism:

Our interviews and scholarship on Occupy LSX suggest that it was populated by a very heterogeneous constituency of activists with respect to political identity. Thus, we find that socialists, Marxists, feminists, anarchists, liberals, greens as well as first time activists with no particular political allegiance, all joined the ranks of Occupy protest camps across the country. Despite the plethora of political identities at Occupy, there was a concerted effort to downplay these differences in order to build solidarity (Roth et al., 2014, p. 16; interview with Occupy activist, 30/06/14).⁸ As one Occupy activist told us,

‘In Occupy we don’t look at where we come from, ..., we don’t look at our ideology and ... when people did talk about it I think we agreed to disagree and then we just get on with it’ (interview with Occupy activist, 15/07/14).

In this fluid, disparate and open political space, we found that self-identified anarchists were surprisingly less visible or present than we had anticipated, especially given commentators’ prevailing characterisation of the movement as anarchist (Dean 2013; Graeber 2012). This is not to say that there were none. The Occupied Times collective (described by one interviewee as anarchist in orientation), for instance, took part in the Anarchist Book Fair of 2012 and based on some of the articles published in this broadsheet, it is evident that a number of anarchists were agitating for a more ‘radical’ approach to changing society. Having said this, it is clear that there were multiple influences on the way Occupy conducted

itself and that it cannot be accurately painted as a self-consciously anarchist movement, either in terms of its identity or its broader ideas and analyses, as we shall see below.

Given the varied identities of the participants, it should come as no surprise that the analyses and discourses of Occupy LSX activists were equally diverse. In order to establish a shared platform, if not policy, Occupy did issue a number of general, rather descriptive, public statements covering their views on a range of subjects from economics to global democracy and a safer space policy. What is notable about these statements, apart from the admirable fact that they were crafted, debated and then approved by sometimes hundreds of people, is that while they stipulate the main injustices blighting the world today, they remain curiously non-committal with respect to their causes. So, for example, the statement issued by the International Outreach Working Group states that ‘Our global system is unsustainable. It is undemocratic and unjust, driven by profit in the interest of the few’ (Occupy London, 2011). It is striking, however, that no reference is made to capitalism or class.

It is only when one begins to read the more nuanced articles published in the OT, that one gets more of an analytical perspective on the problems at hand. This is evident in the statement from ALARM, a London anarchist group, which makes clear reference to intersectionality and the need to fight against sexism and racism as well as capitalism and the state which they see as ‘the heart of things’ (Alarm, August 13, 2012). Interventions of this sort, however, are rare within the OT pages and reference to intersectionality is just as infrequent. Lamenting Occupy’s lack of clear analysis, one self-identified anarchist activist, pointed out to us that the imagery of the 99% vs the 1% serves a reformist agenda in which the majority of people are falsely unified around ‘the lowest common denominator of not being a billionaire’, ignoring the ‘whole array of social stratifications that happens within the 99%’ (interview with anarchist activist, 15/07/14). In sum, for many anarchist activists, Occupy was not radical enough in either its analysis or prescriptions.

With respect to the political practices of Occupy, from the holding of General Assemblies and the role of Working Groups to the collective experience of camp life itself, it is indisputable that activists were animated by notions of direct democracy, inclusive participation, dialogical engagement as well as an ethos of prefiguration and direct action. As Gibson has pointed out: ‘Occupy praxis, though not ideologically anarchist, expresses and reflects a commitment to anarchist ideals’ (2013, p. 336). Nonetheless, we found that there

was some impatience with and resistance to even this aspect of anarchism. So for instance, while activist Brian Whelan, writing in the OT, admits that ‘the anarchist focus on direct action has helped keep the movement interesting’ he also points to, ‘the usual failings of the consensus model’ which are that ‘meetings drag on, informal leaderships emerge and frustrated activists drift away’ (Whelan, 2011, p. 218). An interviewee echoes these concerns when he told us that he ‘did not care’ for the GAs because ‘they went on interminably’ as ‘people go round and round’ in an effort reach consensus (interview with PA activist, 15/07/14).

In sum, we found no convergence between Occupy and anarchism either in terms of the explicitly stated identity of the activists or in terms of their ideology. Instead, we discovered a generalised interest in and commitment to an ethos, a political culture which thematises caring and respectful interpersonal relations and which values concrete actions that seek to bring about change in the here and now. The full realisation of this participatory, prefigurative ethos, however, was marred by gender power relations of various forms.

Section Five: A Left-wing Convergence?

To what extent then, are we witnessing a convergence between anarchism, feminism and the traditional left across our three sites of enquiry? Overall, drawing on the evidence provided by our case studies, we argue that if we are witnessing a reconfiguration of the British left today, it is taking the form of a feminist – rather than an anarchist – turn. This shift can be seen in the increased presence and visibility of women and self-identified feminists in all three political spaces, the efforts of activists within each to engage with feminist theory and ideas – although notions of capitalism and class continue to dominate left discourse – and, at the level of practice, the implementation of formal and informal policies/practices aimed at strengthening gender parity.

To characterise the contemporary left in Britain as partially ‘feminised’ is not to suggest that anarchism, at least as an ethos, is irrelevant to this process of mutation. As we have made clear, an effort to enact and sustain less hierarchical, more pluralistic and participatory forms of organising can be found, to different degrees, in all three sites. It is to say that this nascent ‘democratisation’ of left politics cannot easily be attributed to the presence or impact of self-

identified anarchists per se and must be understood instead in a wider, more complex context that implicates other social movements and political trends at both the domestic and international level.

Starting with the domestic level, we suggest that two key factors have shaped the broad terrain of contemporary left politics in the Britain. The first concerns the revitalisation of feminism in Britain over the past ten years and the consequent re-engagement across much of the British radical left, including its socialist and anarchist wings, with the ideas and practices of this movement (Redfern and Aune, 2013; Dean, 2012). This trend was given added impetus by the radicalisation of young people in the context of the student movement of 2010-11 in which feminist demands and practices oriented to participatory democracy and inclusion garnered a high level of support, fostering a 'horizontal', 'intersectional' sensibility among these young activists (Ibrahim 2011; Cooper and Hardy 2013). Another significant contributing factor was the near implosion of the Socialist Workers' Party in 2013 following its mishandling of allegations of rape against a senior party member (Platt, 2014). This crisis in turn prompted a widespread feeling across many strands and organisations within the British left that they needed to 'get their house in order' on questions of gender and male violence, so as to pre-emptively avoid a fate similar to that suffered by the SWP (interview with Left Unity activist, 4/5/15).

In addition to the reinvigoration of feminism, the second factor shaping radical (and even not so radical) left politics in Britain is its continued political irrelevance, a fact that has been forcefully brought home with the re-election of a Tory majority government in May 2015. Despite a 'spike' of radical activism identified by Bailey (2014) in 2011 and widespread optimism that radical left politics would gain traction in the context of austerity politics, the British left has been unable to capitalise on the political opportunities opened up by the financial crisis. The reasons for this 'failure' are complex and require further investigation, although movement burnout, the UK electoral system's barriers to entry, lack of resources and media coverage are all contributory factors (March, 2011; March and Keith , 2015). Furthermore, as Richard Seymour argues in his recent *Against Austerity* (2014), the radical left's continued attachment to perhaps rather eccentric norms of speech, discourse and political practice limit its popular appeal. Whatever the reasons, the left's recent efforts to pluralise, democratise and even 'feminise' its politics must be understood, at least in part, as a conscious strategy to make itself more appealing to a wider public.

In their quest to popularise left-wing politics, the British left, whether in the form of LU or Occupy, has started to look to their comrades abroad for lessons. It is here that we come to the third trend shaping the three cases that we have mapped in this article: the emergence across Europe of a distinctively left-wing form of populism characterised by appeals to an egalitarian and inclusive conception of ‘the people’ as opposed to the ‘old style’ (i.e., elitist, purist) rendering of left politics. It is in this vein, that Left Unity seeks to ‘do politics differently’ and the Occupy movement claims to represent the 99 versus 1%. Indeed, in October 2014 Left Unity organised a speaking tour of English cities featuring speakers from Podemos and Syriza, with a view to discussing how LU might emulate the success of their Spanish and Greek counterparts.

It is in light of these three trends that the reconfiguration of radical left politics in Britain needs to be situated and analysed. While we have argued that any claims of left-wing convergence are premature, we have also sought to position feminism and anarchism as potential fellow travellers. Indeed, we have suggested that the anarchist ethos of participatory, prefigurative democracy is currently being brought to life in the three sites examined here primarily through the interventions of feminists. Moreover, we have been able to reveal numerous points of contact between the traditional left and these two others strands of left politics: although these points are incipient and precarious, they are visible in ways that they were not a decade ago. To what extent this pluralisation of the left develops momentum will depend on a number of internal and external forces, including the reshaping of the Labour Party in the wake of its defeat in the 2015 general election. What is clear to these authors is that feminism, both as an analytical framework and as a strand of activism, is crucial for making sense of and revitalising left politics in Britain. Gender relations (as well as race, class and sexuality) remain fundamental to the theory, practice and organisation of left politics and the contested status of feminism within the left continues to shape the trajectories and fortunes of both. Thus, amidst the continued ‘gender blindness’ of much of the academic left (Dean, 2014), we want to insist upon the indispensability of feminism, both as a methodological lens and as a progressive politics of the left, for understanding and transforming the left today.

Notes

¹ Including Tony Benn, Jeremy Corbyn MP, Caroline Lucas MP, Owen Jones, Kate Hudson, John Rees, Lindsey German, Tariq Ali, Bob Crow and Len McClusky.

² In total, we conducted 45 interviews across the three sites (split roughly evenly between Occupy, LU and PA, but with many interviewees active across two or more of the three sites).

³ For example interviewees reported that several LU have struggled to attract women members and that women remain under-represented.

⁴ It should be noted that a prominent figure within the People's Assembly took the view that the majority of the membership of PA had proved receptive to feminism, and that incidents of resistance to feminism and women-only organising had been limited (interview with PA activist, 23/07/14 CS).

⁵ As well as PAs in Leeds, Brighton, Wrexham.

⁶ For example: former SWP leaders John Rees and Lindsey German and activists from the organisation Counterfire, Andy Murray Communist Party of Britain, Kate Hudson (Left Unity/CND). While the SWP initially stayed out of the PA, activists report that they have also attempted to use the PA as a venue to criticise mainstream trade unions.

⁷ A more nuanced discussion of how gender operates within society as well as social movements like Occupy is documented in the March 2013 edition of the OT, although it remains on the margins of the movement's discourse. See <http://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=8047> accessed January 27th 2015.

⁸ Interestingly, one exception to this attitude of openness was the decision not to allow SWP to set up their stalls or sell their newspapers in the camps.

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