Whose crisis counts? Intersectionality, Austerity and the Politics of Survival

"Minority Women and austerity: Survival and resistance in France and Britain" (2017) by Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu

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It has now been almost a decade since the global financial crash of 2007-08 that sent many Western nations spiralling into economic free-fall. The response by many national governments was to implement a programme of "austerity". In the UK, this has involved deep and punishing cuts to the public services and a scaling back of the welfare state. This public narrative of austerity has relied upon establishing a "commonsense" (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Hall and O'Shea 2013; Jensen and Tyler 2015) in which the cause of the crisis has been framed as an overgenerous, bloated and ineffective welfare state rather than the reckless behaviour of financial institutions and the political elites that enabled them.

As politicians instructed us to "tighten our belts", austerity policies have resulted in "the deepest and most precipitate cuts ever made in social provision" (Taylor-Gooby, 2013). While justified as "necessary" sacrifices that would ultimately reduce public debt and return the country to economic stability, the austerity project has ostensibly failed. In the UK, the economic think tank the IFS has recently warned that an "end of austerity" will not be realised any time soon, with productivity levels remaining stubbornly low, national debt increasing, and savage welfare cuts set to continue (IFS 2017). Despite claims that "were all in it together", it is now evident that austerity has not been equally felt, with women, those with disabilities, the young and certain ethnic groups disproportionately affected (Fisher and Nandy 2015; Tinson et al 2016).

There is now a significant and rich body of research that vividly demonstrates the suffering, stigma and marginalisation that austerity has inflicted

on individuals (e.g. Garthwaite 2016; Hitchen 2016; Patrick 2017). These devastating costs are products of what Vicki Cooper and David Whyte (2017) call the "violence of austerity"; the everyday, routinised and grotesque forms of state violence towards already-vulnerable groups being enacted through the austerity project and its decimation of forms of social provision.

It is into this frame that *Minority Women and austerity: Survival and resistance in France and Britain* enters, making an essential contribution to contemporary understandings and theorisations of austerity. This is a book that foregrounds minority women's voices and experiences. Rooted in black feminist analyses and epistemological commitments, minority women are presented here as experts and agents of knowledge rather than "devalued victims". Rigorously researched it provides a rich portrait of minority women's experiences of, and resistance to, austerity in England, Scotland and France. The authors use a broad definition of minority women to refer to "women who experience the effects of racialisation, class and gender discrimination as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status" (p. 6). This allows them to attend to the experiences of different groups of women in colour within and across the three national contexts (including women who self-identify as 'black'; as 'refugee' or migrant' women; or as 'of immigrant origin') rather than collapsing these under one homogenising label. The book draws on a rich data set of interviews and focus groups with minority and migrant women activists; third sector representatives; and civil servant and local government officials across these locations. The value of this comparative, cross-national approach is one of the key strengths of the book. Bassel and Emejulu contextualise minority women's experiences within their national contexts, drawing out in great detail how the distinct architecture of citizenship, migration, gender and welfare regimes and austerity measures at play within these locales impact upon minority women's socio-economic position, their activism and their ability to advance their claims to social justice and equality.

This book has many merits. Most notably, its value lay in the strength of the authors" intersectional approach, which foregrounds "a consideration of processes of racialization and hierarchies of legal status, ability and other processes of stratification which exist alongside and are inflected by gender inequalities and are,

in turn exacerbated by austerity measures" (p.10). Through this intersectional analyses the authors offer a deft exploration of the ways in which minority women have both been affected by austerity policies and how they have enacted resistance to it.

It is important at this point to reiterate a central assertion made throughout the book: while minority women have indeed been disproportionately adversely affected by austerity, these effects have not created a fundamentally "new" experience of precarity. Rather they can best be understood as extending and accelerating the "ordinary" experiences of inequality that far preceded 2008:

> Minority women experience what we call "routinized crisis": persistent, institutionalised and ordinary hardships of everyday life. Their persistently high unemployment and poverty rates are not "exceptional" and not necessarily problems to be addressed, since they are indicators of capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy operating as intended. Once we understand minority women's precarity as the banality of everyday inequalities, we can begin to understand the politics of the construction of the 2008 economic crisis. (p.40)

This critique of the amnesia that suffuses discussions of austerity as a "new crisis" resonates with Gargi Bhattacharyya's (2015, 3) warning that we must "forgo the nostalgia that seeks to remake the world before austerity, not least because the pre-austerity world was also divided, unequal and unliveable for many".

Thus, through this historically-attendant frame, *Minority Women and Austerity* elucidates how austerity has sharpened and entrenched existing forms of social and economic disadvantage experienced by minority women because of their already-marginalised status. This includes, for example, the disproportionate impact of cuts to public spending on these women because of their historical over-representation as both employees within the public sector (such as nursing, teaching and care work) and as users of public services. The book also illustrates how austerity policies have transformed the context within which third sector organisations involving minority women's concerns and activism operate. This

includes budget cuts, increasing competition and marketisation, and a creeping enterprise culture in welfare service delivery. Foregrounding the voices of those working within these organisations, the authors illustrate how the "neoliberal colonisation" (p.53) of the third sector within contexts of austerity has not only threatened the survival of individual organisations and the range of services they are able to provide. The book also demonstrates the eroding effects of these shifts in undermining the possibilities for collective solidarity between associations and radical, intersectional analyses and actions. While *Minority Women and Austerity* shows how these transformations can discipline third sector organisations into entrepreneurial ways of working, the authors do not paint these spaces or the practitioners working within them as entirely captured by neoliberalism. Instead, they provide examples of third sector organisations working strategically, creatively and subversively within and against these constraints. In chapter 5 ("The politics of survival") Bassel and Emejulu move their lens to minority women's activism outside of formal third sector spaces, exploring the diverse ways in which minority women assert themselves as political agents. This includes local community organising and volunteering, radical grassroots activism and self-help groups. Through this rich account this book demands a reconceptualisation of both *what* constitutes resistance and *who* gets recognised as an activist.

The authors also provide an important exploration of the ways in which minority women are weaponised by media and political elites to service both the neoliberal austerity project and anti-immigration nationalist agendas. This analysis contributes to work on the "cultural political economy" (Jensen and Tyler 2015) of austerity which has examined how the logic of neoliberal capitalism is defended, and public support for welfare reform achieved, through the scapegoating of vulnerable groups. We have seen this in the trope of the "shirker", "skiver" or "benefits cheat" that circulates across the speeches of politicians, in tabloid newspapers, and within "poverty porn" programming (Allen et al 2014; Jensen 2014). Bassel and Emejulu's intersectional analyses highlights the ways in which minority groups (and minority women in particular) become constructed as "problem groups" and "alien others" within times of upheaval and national "crisis" such as the discourse of 'poor parenting' within black communities that followed the

2011 English riots, or the burkini ban in France. These processes are not new but form part of a longer history of colonialism and racialisation through which minority women have been constituted and misrecognised.

In locating austerity in a longer historical context of minority women's social and economic hardships, Othering and racialisation, Bassel and Emejulu reveal a "damaging bias" inherent in the naming and framing of the 2008 economic crash *as* a "crisis" and the "specific groups assumed to be affected by [it]" (p40-41). In compelling readers to think critically about constructions of "the crisis", their analysis raises a pressing question: Is it only when the economic and social conditions that have long-been an ordinary feature of minority women's experiences – exploitative work, stagnating wages, housing insecurity and so on – come to be felt by traditionally economically privileged groups that they receive policy and media attention? This bias can be observed in declarations of a "middle class recession", and or the language of the "squeezed middle" or "JAMS" ("Just about managing") that has pervaded political rhetoric over that last decade and which construct the middle-class as bearing the brunt of austerity. Yet even whilst the economic crisis and policy responses have affected the working and living conditions of the middle classes, research shows that the growth of insecure and low-paid employment and increased living costs has had a greater impact on low-income households (Warren, 2015; Corlett 2017). It can also help us critically unpack the narrative of intergenerational conflict between a so-called "lost generation" of millennials and "baby boomers". Whilst drawing much-needed attention to the landscapes of inequality and broken promises in which young people are forging their futures, through signalling a *universalised* experience of generational decline this narrative negates the continued *intra*generational inequalities of race, class, gender, and so on, that shape young people's access to employment, education and housing (Roberts and Allen 2016). This book is testament to the urgency and value of intersectional approaches which destablise dominant representations of "the crisis" by opening up a space for "analysis that demonstrate[s] differential and asymmetrical impacts" (p.9).

Bassel and Emejulu have made a necessary and vital contribution to understandings of austerity is in demanding that we - as readers, scholars, activists

– ask ourselves: *whose crisis counts*? This question forms the title of one of the book's initial chapters, but in fact is provocation that is threaded through the book. The authors operationalize David Theo Goldberg's (2006) concept of "political racelessness" in order to expose and critique the marginalisation of minority women experiences and interests. They introduce this concept in Chapter 2 through a detailed discussion on Europe's racial logic; a logic that denies racial injustices and colonial histories and is entwined with forms of white ignorance (Mills 2007) and white innocence (Wekker 2016). The authors demonstrate how this racial logic renders inaudible minority women's claims to justice - based upon gender, class, race and legal status.

Crucially, the authors expose how the devaluing of minority women's experiences and intersectional social justice claims is not confined to the political Right. The European Left, despite holding themselves up as progressive and committed to anti-racist ideals, is itself guilty of "perpetuat[ing] political racelessness at the expense of minority groups and minority women in particular" (p19). The authors describe how white feminist spaces, and parts of the socialist and social democratic Left *actively* reproduce political racelessness and white ignorance and innocence:

> We must analyse how the Left does not sit outside structures of the racial contract but plays a key role in its reproduction. The Left's dangerous myths about itself… are jealously protected. In order for the Left to defend its colonial identities it must deny that it" conceptions of emancipatory politics are premised on, and made possible by, the effective exclusion of particular social groups who exist at the intersection f race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status (p.23).

This analysis applies to the very social movements and ostensibly progressive activist spaces of the Left that have sought to challenge austerity. As the authors show, these spaces have tended to deny the complexity of intersectional analyses of inequality on order to mobilse a "false unity of the 'Working class' or 'the people' " (p.26). This downgrading – or erasure - of minority women's concerns and political

claims by "progressive" social movements constitutes a form of "epistemic violence" (p.27), meaning that minority women must censor themselves in order to be "included" in these Left-wing spaces. The authors ask: "What does justice or solidarity mean in dominant left wing politics, if it cannot support and sustain an intersectional politics?" (p27).

This question has real and growing urgency in the present moment as the European Left contends not only with continued austerity but an on-going migrant crisis, terrorist attacks across Europe and the unexpected EU referendum result in June 2016. In this context we have witnessed a growing backlash against multiculturalism. This is manifest not just within the violent resurgence of extremist right nationalist groups across Europe, but also in forms of "respectable racism" (Bouamama 2004) and general anti-immigrant sentiment that have been unleashed and legitimised by political elites. In responses to Brexit, we have also seen the intensification of the very forms of political raceleness and white ignorance that Bassel and Emejulu critique. This can be observed in the circulation of powerful narratives that have sought to explain the Brexit (and Trump) victories as the political actions of those had been "left behind" by neoliberalism and globalisation, and punished by austerity. In the UK, public, media and some academic commentary has overwhelmingly explained the Leave note as delivered by white working class communities in deindustrialised northern towns. As Gurminder Bhambra (2017) has powerfully argued, this narrative of Brexit as a white working class "backlash" constitutes a form of "methodological whiteness". Not only does it dangerously misrepresent and oversimplify the composition of Leave voters and their motivations (evidence shows that the Brexit vote was delivered largely by older well-paid, propertied middle-classes in the south of England (Dorling 2016)). This narrative of a white working class backlash also blocks an intersectional analyses of the present political and socio-economic landscape. Such an analysis would recognise for example, how migrant workers have been routinely exploited and precaritised by the machinations of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism. It would also be attentive to the high rates of poverty and inequality among black and minority ethnic populations which existed "pre-crisis" but which have been exacerbated by austerity measures (Bhambra 2017).

Connected to this, post-Brexit we have borne witness to a reinvigoration on some parts of the Left of a longstanding critique of "identity politics" as enabling the triumph of neoliberalism. In this lazy and impoverished narrative, feminism, anti-racism and LGBTQ analyses have damaged Left "unity" by detracting from the Left's "real struggle" against class-based injustice. This critique not excludes intersectional analyses of contemporary inequality by evoking the myth of a homogenised, unified and "authentic" working class. It is also, as Sofa Gradin (2017) writes, based on a series of fundamental misconceptions:

> Radical queerness and anti-racism are not forms of identity politics; and class struggle is not free from questions of identity. All forms of social life are already coded by class, race, gender and disability, so there are no forms of politics or struggle that exist outside these structures of social power. The claim that intersectional critiques distract from the "real struggle" or are divisive is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of both intersectionality and socialism.

In *Minority Women and Austerity*, Bassel and Emejulu provide its readers with a powerful set of analytical tools for understanding and challenging these misunderstandings within parts of the Left, and for insisting on the necessity of an intersectional analyses of austerity.

In conclusion, despite these on-going challenges, there are some reasons for optimism within the current landscape. In particular, there is evidence of a growing visibility and vitality of intersectional activist groups and analyses within the anti-austerity movement. In the UK, this includes radical feminist activist groups such as Sisters Uncut, whose on-going work has challenged government cuts to services disproportionately affecting minority women including refuges and other domestic violence services. We have also seen policy-oriented research into austerity, such as the report "Intersecting Inequalities: the impact of austerity on black and minority ethnic women in the UK", published by the Women's Budget Group and Runnymeade Trust in partnership with Coventry Women's Voices and RECLAIM (Hall et al, 2017). This report, researched and written with minority women,

explicitly foregrounds and makes visible the disproportionate impact of successive government budgets and spending reviews on BME women in the UK. These examples demonstrate that there are spaces in which minority women are leading precisely the forms of counter-hegemonic action that Basell and Emejulu call for: action which challenges the violence of austerity and exposes its asymmetrical effects.

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