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The Politics of Exhaustion¹

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Abstract

Drawing on our comparative research project conducted in six European cities, this article proposes a tentative politics of exhaustion as a way to understand the promise and perils of women of colour activists' solidarity work. Through an examination of how women of colour activists strategise, organise and mobilise, we demonstrate the political and psychological impact of exhaustion. To declare exhaustion, we argue, is to hail the equally exhausted to build solidarity. Understanding the politics of exhaustion can help shed light on the creative practices of women of colour activists in European cities today, as well as highlight the structural processes that demand activists' exhaustion.

Introduction

'I'm exhausted' is a familiar refrain among women of colour activists in cities across Europe and North America. Over the last ten years of studying women of colour activists' political behaviour, we have noted how a specific repertoire of exhaustion has emerged and we want to reflect on the meaning and purpose of this declaration, in this political moment. We argue that exhaustion plays an important discursive and temporal role of women of colour activists looking for and finding recognition in like-minded activists—both past and present. To claim exhaustion is to hail the equally exhausted and build solidarity. Declaring exhaustion requires no explanation, and no justification of distinctiveness. If this is required, that signals the misunderstanding of what is at stake and what women of colour's interests and desires are. Exhaustion operates quite literally as a structure of feeling of mutual recognition.

In this article, we propose a tentative politics of exhaustion as a device to understand the promise and perils of women of colour's solidarity work. Drawing on our comparative project, *Women of Colour Resist*, which examines activists in six European cities, we will demonstrate how the very real emotional and physiological state of exhaustion impacts on women of colour's activism. Extreme tiredness and demoralisation are both the signal that activists are doing meaningful work but also the breaking point that stops them from continuing with their activism over the long term. We consider some of the reasons why women of colour activists feel compelled to drive themselves to the point of exhaustion and reflect on how and whether there can ever be an end point of exhaustion besides burnout. We begin first with a short background to our project and methods and then turn to our findings.

Women of Colour Resist: Project Background

Our comparative study, conducted in London, Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Copenhagen and Madrid examines how women of colour activists strategise, organise and undertake

¹ We would like to thank everyone who gave their time to participate in our project, and our research assistants: Dominique Haensell, Mette Toft Nielsen, Rose Ndengue, Imani Robinson, Nicole Grégoire and Nadia Nadesan.

their grassroots activism.² We explore how women of colour activists struggle against the triple crisis (Emejulu and van der Scheer forthcoming) of the unprecedented reductions to social welfare spending and provision across Europe; the xenophobic backlash against migrants (e.g. surveillance, detention, deportation) and the rise of far right parties, mainstreaming of extremist language and spike in racist and xenophobic hate crimes.

We take an expansive view of ‘women’, to include cis and trans women as well as non-binary femmes. As in our previous work, we define ‘women of colour’ as women who ‘experience the effects of processes of racialisation, class and gender dominations as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status’ (Bassel and Emejulu 2017: 6). We recognise that this terminology does not travel seamlessly across the geographic and linguistic boundaries of this study and generates debate within as well as across contexts. These tensions and debates are part of what we explore.

A team of six colleagues acted as research assistants in each country and undertook 9-12 one-to-one semi-structured interviews and 1-2 focus groups in each city. Interviews and focus groups were complemented with contemporaneous field notes from research assistants’ observations of activists’ work and social media analysis of key activist activities. Interview and focus group questions aimed to interpret what anti-austerity, anti-fascism and migrants’ rights mean in practice, what key issues are activating groups and which important, but neglected issues activists are working on in (relative) isolation. Building on our past work (Emejulu and Sobande 2019; Bassel and Emejulu 2017) we invited participants and research team colleagues to join us in rethinking what activism looks like, from street protests to creative resistances in everyday life. This requires also rethinking what leadership looks like which informed our sampling strategy to include formal leaders (those with a named position within a group) and informal leaders (those without a position but are important influencers and connectors).

Exhaustion as response

Exhaustion describes a very real emotional and psychological state of being with activists fighting burnout and demoralisation. In our empirical findings, we can see how exhaustion is directly linked to activists’ commitment to supporting their communities and advancing their interests. For example, this activist in Berlin described her exhaustion in these terms:

So, I learned that I not only feel a sense of responsibility, I also feel a sense of pressure [about my activism]. That I feel a sense of guilt and blame coming from community members who put demands on me which I can’t actually satisfy...While I already thought that I was aware of my boundaries—[my] experience...actually taught me that I need to reinforce my boundaries around what I’m able to provide in terms of my resources. It reinforced for me the impression that for the things which I care about, sometimes, I am not able to care for myself in the way in which actually I’m trying to teach others to care for themselves.

² The project is funded by the Open Society Foundation (OR2018-43276), November 2018-April 2021.

This dilemma—of being so committed to others that one is unable to care for oneself—seems to be replicated across all six of our research sites and appears to indicate that exhaustion is perhaps the unavoidable consequence of solidarity work with marginalised communities. In these terms, activism seems to operate as a zero-sum game in which the collective's needs are prioritised over an individual's well-being. This unsustainable care work functions, at least for some activists, as a synecdoche for solidarity. Understanding solidarity on these terms will inevitably lead to activist burnout, but the question remains: what is the alternative besides this sacrifice of personal psychological and physical health?

However, perhaps this is not the right question to be asking in relation to women of colour activists and their solidarity work. Rather than individualising exhaustion, we should refocus our analysis to understand the catastrophic circumstances that many women of colour activists are struggling against and how this context generates and demands exhaustion from women of colour. Focusing on 'structural exhaustion' helps us avoid pathologising the exhausted and brings into sharp relief the multiple crises that exact a huge toll on the minds and bodies of women of colour. Indeed, it is the insidious ways in which austerity, xenophobia and fascism operate in different contexts that evoke exhaustion. For example, an activist in London discusses the rise of the far right in these terms:

[The far right] get into [the] spaces of everyday life, through...their loudness, connection to football, so they pop up in these places and push people towards a more violent, fascistic mindset...It's the epistemic frame that we are in, that they can then pull formal politics, that then ricochets out into the policies and their implementation. That's always been the danger of the far right. The ways in which they get in to formal politics to pull them ever more rightwards. And that's what they are clearly doing, absolutely successfully.

What is generating exhaustion is how the far right has both penetrated everyday life and become normalised in formal politics—as seen in the Brexit Party's triumph at the 2019 European election and the installation of what many see as a far right cabinet in Boris Johnson's newly elected government. The insidiousness of the far right cannot be refused or ignored—this is why it is so exhausting. To do nothing in this context puts activists and their community at risk. But activists cannot be activated all the time, thus activists experience burnout and, ironically, leave the activist scene altogether.

In Denmark, the 2019 election saw the Social Democrats rise to prominence on a pro-welfare but hardline anti-immigration stance, drawn from the far right. They secured a minority government with left-wing partners, in what has been reported as a softened stance on immigration (Guardian 2019). In this context, activists must struggle against both their government and their ostensible allies in activist spaces who are both equally exhausting. For this activist in Copenhagen, the structures of exhaustion are deeply intimate. She must fight against white anti-racist activists in order to advance the interests of women of colour:

I think the people we have in the group are allies, I don't think the organisation is an ally. I think that they would like to think that they are, but they are not,

because they are not willing to, to a large extent, to acknowledge some of the things that they do that are problematic, they are not willing to sort of see us...or take us seriously...they are very patronising...So it is very hard for them to let go, it is very hard for them to receive criticism, because they see themselves as not like the other organisations. They are very like, “not like the other organisations” is such a prominent argument within the organisation, because they think of themselves as higher. So I think, within the little group that we have, the white people that we have are allies, but with the organisation...it is not an allyship, it is, they are trying to have this sort of paternalistic relationship with us, where they want to control what we do.

As we have long documented in our work on women of colour’s anti-austerity activism in Britain and France, a key point of contention in multi-racial and multi-class coalitions is how many white activists refuse to take women of colour activists and their intersectional analyses seriously (Bassel and Emejulu 2017; Emejulu and Bassel 2016). It is unsurprising, given the severity of the social, economic and political crises that women of colour are experiencing, that these structural power dynamics of misrecognition and disrespect continue unabated. Exhaustion, then, comes in many forms and from many directions. This begs the question—where is the space for respite for women of colour activists?

Exhaustion is also generated in an unlikely way: when survival has to come first. As the far right have penetrated mainstream German politics, it has created new spaces and further justified the need for anti-racist activism. However, given the severity of the threat, women of colour activists who are seeking to preserve and expand intersectional spaces based on race, class, gender, sexuality and legal status, find themselves having to make unappetising compromises in the face of the very real fascist threat. For example, an activist in Berlin discusses this exhausting dilemma like this:

I think that the challenges of working with activists who don’t take intersectional approaches is that our ability to hold that difference challenges us in our commitment to continue to work with organisations that don’t share our approach. In the current circumstances, where the right wing is able to organise itself and to act worldwide really quickly—because they do not have the obligation to have consensual decision making across organisations which are very disparate and have no influence on each other at all—makes it for me critical to work with all organisations which are working towards the goal of liberation. And to accept that they are not going to do things in the way in which I would like them to do it, according to my principles...I’m particularly challenged by organisations which are quite misogynistic in their structure and behaviour...I’m extremely challenged by people who do not show queer awareness, somehow. And I know that for myself and so I find it difficult to work with organisations which give power to cis men and cis men only...But I’m prepared to work with all organisations as long as they are non-fascist in their structure and purposes...I assume that if I allow them to keep working towards their goal, and I work towards my goal, if we don’t work against each other

directly, that we will both contribute to the main goal—which is surviving fascism.

This German pragmatism of surviving fascism is important and avoiding internecine conflict is crucial—but making this compromise comes at a high price of allowing patriarchal and homophobic organisations to operate unchallenged. Why must the most marginalised settle for a compromised liberation in the face of surviving fascism? It is these very real power dynamics at the grassroots which sap women of colour of energy and demand their exhaustion in the name of solidarity.

Understanding the politics of exhaustion explodes fictions of political equality when power dynamics at the grassroots drain women of colour of energy in the name of solidarity. ‘Mixed’ spaces – such as multi-racial, -gender, -class, -sexuality, -immigration status, -ability coalitions and movements – may never be politically productive if women of colour are expected to bear exhaustion unequally, disproportionately and, ideally, in silence. Limited resources, the unequal on-going strain of context-specific austerity, and intersecting forms of violence are daily realities for women of colour inside and outside of these activist spaces. If it is deemed acceptable for emotional energy to be constantly expended with little hope of success or reciprocity, and ‘allies’ fail to see women of colour activists and read their pain and distress, there is little to hope for and much to expect in the form of burnout and withdrawal.

Separatist organising – as a space for respite against structural exhaustion – inevitably animates white anxieties when made public. In the case of the 2017 Nyansapo festival organised by Mwasi Collectif, perhaps the leading Afrofeminist collective in Europe, liberal left and far right sentiments combined to punish these activists for daring to organise a political event on terms that best suited Black women and femmes in the first instance (for a detailed discussion of this situation see: Mwasi Collectif 2019). The mayor of Paris threatened to prosecute the organisers for discrimination because some events, held on private property, were for Black folks only. The charge of reverse racism, or *‘racisme anti-blanc’*, can only be possible in the context of ongoing, violent colonial amnesia. The toll of these confrontations is high. Defending this space means also naming ongoing colonial relations in a context where this is inaudible and illegible, because the humanity of the colonised is still up for debate (Mbembe 2010). These conflicts distract from the difficult work of trying to organise together, across differences, to resist white supremacy. Activists in France and in the other countries in our study struggle in the wake of these confrontations, navigating virtual and physical spaces that are increasingly under surveillance and attack from different sources that reinforce each other. Activists burnout from hypervigilance and the need to constantly be ready to respond to bad faith attacks. Each onslaught traces out the paths and limits of future activism, such as the need to be selectively visible, or off the radar (see: Emejulu and van der Scheer forthcoming). Relentless hostility and denial of humanity require this never-ending reconfiguration. Exhaustion is, in and of itself, inexhaustible.

Exhaustion as end and beginning

Our outlining of a tentative politics of exhaustion does not claim to encompass all the different activist permutations we studied across our six cases. However, focusing on the dynamics of individual and structural exhaustion highlights the particular perils women of colour face in their attempts to enact their public politics. We think it is important to explicitly name the costs of solidarity and understand the price that is paid when activists must settle for a compromised liberation. Taking women of colour's exhaustion seriously helps us understand an enduring Black feminist lesson about solidarity and coalition politics: that they are uncomfortable and, ultimately, unsustainable—but also unavoidable. As Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983: 356-7) noted almost 40 years ago:

I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're *really* doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing...You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive.

In order to combat the tripartite crises that they face, women of colour activists cannot turn away from solidarity, coalition and their attendant exhaustions. However, exhaustion also functions in other, more unexpected ways which can, counter-intuitively, create spaces for respite and alternative political action. It is to this that we now turn to conclude.

'I'm exhausted' expresses an emotional and psychological state of being. At the same time, it acts as a structure of mutual recognition within precarious collectives. This is an assertion of fear, anxiety, fatigue, disbelief and despair as shared burdens, collective properties that – sometimes – enable reading and recognising the pain of others with whom space is held. This mutual recognition may not 'succeed' according to the conventional understandings of social movements studies, in the sense of achieving specific campaign objectives. Nor do reciprocity and acceptance necessarily follow, especially when other oppressions go unchallenged. But it can become possible to set different terms of solidarity by hailing the equally exhausted. It can be possible to express the desire to build solidarity on terms that resist white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism rather than conform to parameters set by the white left. Instead of a politics configured around asserting legitimacy (and humanity) to 'allies' - perpetually explaining that 'class' or 'feminism' don't do the political work on their own in white-dominated spaces - other horizons unfold that prefigure alternative socialities and temporalities.

'I'm exhausted' is a way of speaking of the darkness that surrounds us in this moment of multiple catastrophes. What it also does is bind activists together—not in mutual victimhood—but in conviviality. As Laleh Khalili (2016: 585) argues in her meditation on the politics of pleasure, 'The pleasure of conviviality is about overcoming atomisation or individualisation even if it does not sow transgression or resistance...This holds a political promise...of a life held in common'. Declaring exhaustion is how some women of colour activists build and sustain community—'a life

held in common'. It is a device to help them peer through the darkness to find each other—and hold on tight. Exhaustion, 'burnout', can therefore act as an endpoint and gateway to withdrawal, but also a moment of reflection and rebirth of activism in different configurations. These creative spaces and practices enact ways of being together and caring for communities that work to different rhythms and collective understandings that we explore as our project advances. Thus the notions of 'end' and 'beginning' are, temporarily, transcended. Solidarity becomes transformative rather than locked in the perpetual, exhausting orbit of resistance to multiple oppressions inside and outside of 'activist' spaces. Freedom is real, now, and imagined.

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